ISSUE #69: THREE TAKES ON REMAKES

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

LUIGI'S MANSION 2 HD

INTERVIEW: **TOMM HULETT** OF WAYFORWARD

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA LIVE-ACTION FILM CONFIRMED!

THE NINTENDO FORCE **GAME OF THE YEAR** AWARDS 2023

UFOURIA: THE SAGA 2

SUPER MARIO RPG

SUPER MARIO BROS. **WONDER**

SONIC SUPERSTARS

FASHION DREAMER

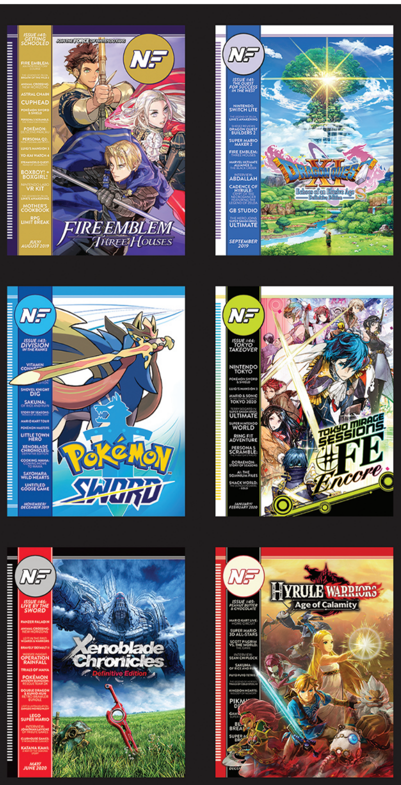
SUPER MARIO BROS. LIVE-ACTION FILM REMASTERED!

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2024

NEW BUNDLE OPTIONS!

ANOTHER CALENDAR YEAR is moving into the rearview window, and that means another Full-Year Bundle of NF issues is now available to order in our website shop! Most of you reading this probably received each of our six 2023 magazine issues as they were published, one at a time, but we like to offer whole-year sets to help new fans catch up if they've just recently joined the Force!

I've also been digging back through some earlier back issues that still have some copies in stock, and have cobbled together two more new bundles of old issues. One set has issues mostly pulled from the 40s (#40, #41, #43, #44, #46 and #49), while the other is mostly 30s magazines (#33, #34, #35, #38, #39 and one oddball out, #24). These bundles are kind of like back issue grab bags and don't have much thematic connection to one another, so my apologies for their lack of cohesion! But I know several of you out there are trying to assemble a fuller collection of past publications from our fine Force, and I may as well offer what we've still got on hand to help you avoid paying any resellers' higher prices on eBay! **— LUCAS**



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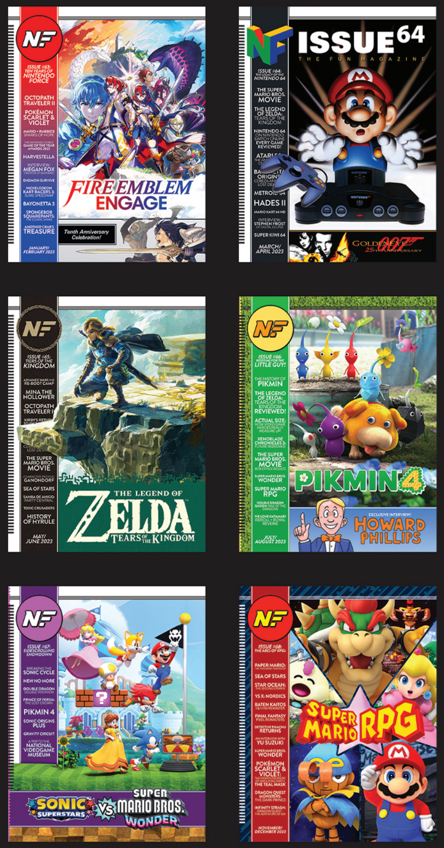

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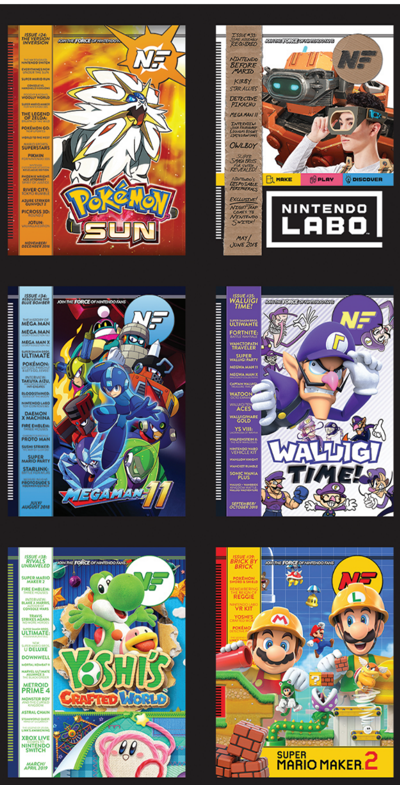

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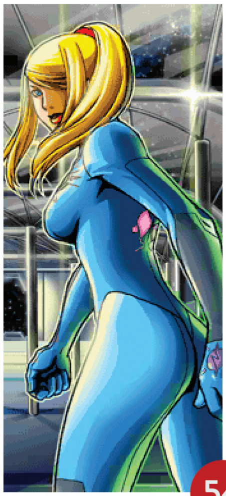
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ON THE COVER

It's not quite as chaotic as the last time we split our front cover into three pieces for Xenoblade Chronicles 3, Splatoon 3 and Bayonetta 3, but we have carved the cover into thirds once more in order to illustrate our angle for this edition: Three Takes on Remakes! We'll be examining "remakes," "remasters" and "reimaginings" in the pages ahead, and trying to align each of these three new games within each of those categories. (Try not to be too sad about having to share the spotlight, Ashley!)

JANUARY/
FEBRUARY 2024

INBOX

GAMES SO NICE THEY MADE THEM TWICE

Books don't usually get rewritten. Music is sometimes re-recorded, either by its original artists or by cover bands paying tribute to those originals. Movies getting remade is a fairly frequent occurrence, and has led to things like the film Freaky Friday having four different versions and lots of different spin-offs and homages beyond that . . . but even Hollywood's total count of remakes can't quite keep up with the video game industry. In the gaming world, old media being brought back to life for an encore appearance is an incredibly common occurrence.

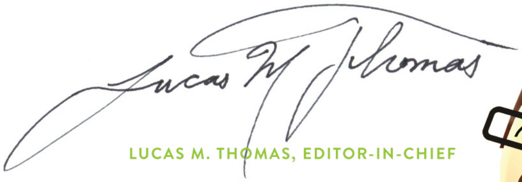
We've touched on the topic of video game remakes in NF in the past, but with the release schedule we're right smack in the middle of at the moment, it seemed like now was the right time to revisit it with a more in-depth discussion. The Big N's last big release of 2023 was a remake: Super Mario RPG, which claimed our cover spot last time. And now, as 2024 is dawning, the first-party slate is full of several more – four out of the five first-party titles Nintendo currently has on their release schedule are some shade of remake!

Another Code: Recollection is on the slate for January. Mario vs. Donkey Kong drops in February. Luigi's Mansion 2 HD is set for sometime in the Summer and Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door will be getting an encore in 2024 as well.

And then third-party publishers are pitching in, too! We've got Contra: Operation Galuga coming soon, a visually remastered Tomb Raider trilogy due in February, freshly refurbished versions of The Legend of Legacy and the Apollo Justice trilogy of Ace Attorney titles . . . and surely many more to follow beyond those!

With all of those on the way – as well as the huge number of remakes that the Switch has already seen released over the last seven years – it was time to take a closer look at the whys and the hows of remaking old games. Our central feature in this issue will break down the terminology as we attempt to clearly define "remakes" and "remasters" and "reimaginings," so we can all get on the same page with the proper word usage. We've also prepped previews of all the games I just mentioned, and have reviewed several more that fit into this category in some way or another.

But there's more to discuss beyond that! We've got the announcement of a live-action Legend of Zelda movie to discuss (so we reconvened the NF Film Club for that). We've got our 2023 Game of the Year Awards to give out. We've got reviews of major titles like Super Mario Bros. Wonder and Sonic Superstars to complete. And more! So please enjoy this NF issue, just as it is. (We probably won't remake it in the future.)



LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #68:
NOVEMBER/
DECEMBER 2023

We closed out 2023 by turning our attention to RPGs, and hopefully many of you have been enjoying the new Super Mario RPG since NF #68 arrived in your mailbox! We've got our full review of that game lying ahead in this issue for you. Meanwhile, we're keeping a lot of its same momentum going in this issue's theme too: since Super Mario RPG is a remake, and there are many more of those coming up in the year ahead too!

Our Poll questions last time tackled that topic. First, we wanted to hear which upcoming remake you're most excited about. Next, we asked you to share your thoughts on "remake," "remaster" and "reimagining" as terms, and how you personally define their differences. Finally, we wanted you to tell us about your most-wanted, but-probably-never-gonna-happen remake! Here's what you all sent in:

LETTERS

Without a doubt, I am most jazzed about the remake of Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door!!! I've been wanting that one for so long, but it's been sealed off from me up until now. (It may well be worth it, but there was no way I was going to spend over $100 for a used copy.) So now I can finally experience what everyone calls the best Paper Mario! I sure loved the original!

I define the remake terms as follows:
-Remake: Completely building the game from scratch to match the original.
-Remaster: Upscaling an already-existing game with better graphics.
-Reimagining: Similar to a remake, but it doesn't care if it's faithful to the original. It sort of tells the same story, but with several key changes.

I really wanna see a Castlevania: Symphony of the Night remake, or at least a re-release. I have no idea why some companies refuse to remake or port their best-selling games, but it seems to me like they're missing out on making a lot of money. **– GAME TOM**

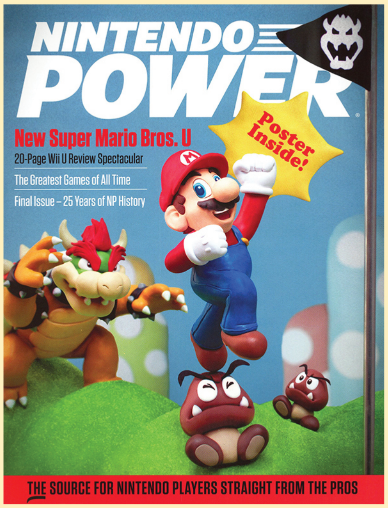
My one "pie in the sky" remake game would be Mischief Makers for the N64. That game was wild. When my friend lent it to me, I had no idea what I was in for. Those weird ghost-looking people. A female main character, back when that was not common. Anime cutscenes. "SHAKE SHAKE!" I would love to see some sort of modern remake. The 2D sidescroller genre is clearly still relevant – Super Mario Bros. Wonder proves that. A Mischief Makers remake would definitely be niche, but I think it would do well. **– JUSTIN**

I'm most excited for Another Code: Recollection. In part because Trace Memory was my favorite game from the early days of the DS, so it will be good to revisit it; in part because seeing a remake for a completely different system will give some insight into development in general; but mostly because I'm excited to finally be able to play the sequel. The Wii catalog is full of unique games that could be considered hidden gems (see below), so any time one is brought back is a time for celebration.

I'd think more of remake/remaster/etc. if they were used consistently and not merely at the whims of marketers, but in general I look at them as a continuum: simple ports stay as faithful as possible, remasters preserve gameplay but update things like assets, remakes stay true to the original design but build everything from the ground up, and reimaginings do whatever they feel like.

Easy: I'd want a remake of Fragile Dreams from the Wii, and second place isn't close. Nothing else, game or otherwise, has captured so well either the tragedy of being alone or the beauty of a world in ruins. Already guaranteed to be a niche title, the harsh assessments of reviewers for gameplay (that wasn't as close to flawed as they made it out to be) ensured that most people missed out on what I consider gaming's most haunting experience. (I'm still irate that Nintendo Power gave it a 5.5, the most unforgivable score they ever assigned.) Fragile Dreams deserves an audience, and gamers deserve to know what this industry is capable of. **– JEREMY S.**

Fragile Dreams is an excellent pick!



STILL CARRYING NP'S TORCH, 11 YEARS LATER

I recently thought to myself, "Is Nintendo Power still around?" I was sad to find that it wasn't – and then I found NF Magazine through word of other NP fans through Reddit. I had to subscribe immediately with the positive reviews I read!

I was an avid reader of NP back in elementary school. The library had a subscription – and I was the only kid who checked them out, so every month I'd be right there when it arrived. I forgot how much they meant to me!

Now, with Issue #68 of NF in hand, I am reliving memories I thought were lost – blinking away tears as I'm reminded how much Nintendo meant to not only me, but so many others too. I'm only on Page 6 and I'm already more than happy to have this subscription in my life. So thank you. You've brought that lost bit of magic back to this 26-year-old. Thank you x1000!! **– GWEN SHEPHERD**

Thanks for saying thanks, Gwen! This issue marks our 11th anniversary, and I think printing this letter from you is sufficient celebration of that milestone. It's been a long time now since the final NP issue, but NF's going strong!

While there are so many remakes to be excited about in the next year, I think they all pale in comparison to my excitement for the remake of Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. Unlike the original Paper Mario which I played on Wii U Virtual Console, there is no other way to play The Thousand-Year Door than on original hardware, so I think it's great that it will finally be more accessible. And having played Super Paper Mario, I am really looking forward to exploring how the Paper Mario franchise evolved over its first few games. And besides, I think it will be a blast to play too! **– DANIEL INVERSO**

The one video game remake that I want but don't dare hope for would my first and favorite 16-bit RPG . . . Phantasy Star IV. **– SHILLIHS MAHAS**

I'm really excited for the Mario vs. Donkey Kong remake because I've never gotten to play any of those games, though we have a couple. And TTYD will be really cool! I played through the original, but I never got around to finishing it. **– JUDAH**

I'm most excited for Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. It's one of my favorite games of all time and it made me cry. I made a walkthrough back in the day on YouTube playing through the whole game under the name nintendoplayersmash, and I beat the game over 15 times, so I'm excited to jump back into this amazing achievement of a game!
– MATTHEW K. (NINTENDOPLAYERSMASH)
I had to verify your claim, and it looks like your walkthrough is still active on YouTube to this day! Well done being dedicated enough to record footage by pointing a camera at a CRT TV screen!

The Luigi's Mansion 2 remake has me most excited. I loved the third game and want to play the first two. The third game was fun with one mansion, but the second one has five. The second game also has fun ghosts such as Polterpup! **– BENJAMIN HILTY**

I typically prefer sequels/revivals over remakes, but if I had to choose one, it would be a completed version of Crash Twinsanity. That game is already held up as the best Crash has ever been as both a character and as an exploration of his world, but about 60% of it was left on the cutting room floor due to Vivendi's mismanagement. **– ZEEBOR**

The original Animal Crossing should get a remake! The newer Animal Crossings are amazing, but there are so many cool and weird things that were left behind that I want to see again (plus adding tool shortcuts and bigger pockets). And they can add the things from Dōbutsu no Mori e+ that I've heard about but never got to play! **– KYLA H.**
I could see Animal Crossing being the kind of series that gets a "back to the basics" sequel at some point in the future. Good call!

I think they should make remakes and remasters cheaper! Because I have most of them on the Wii U and Wii and they only add a few new things to them! But I like reimaginings because they are usually totally different and really cool!!!

The remake I'd want is probably Tomodachi Life! It looks really silly and super fun!!!! But it is expensive and rare! I would be super happy and excited if Nintendo remade it on the Switch or the next console and added more stuff to it like an online mode!! **– QUINN GAGNON**

I've been holding out hope that Square will give Chrono Trigger the HD-2D treatment for quite a while now. I have yet to play Chrono Trigger, and part of me is waiting for a remake or remaster on modern hardware to do so. **– CAMERON ASBURY**

A big thanks again to everyone who answered the Player's Poll! Beyond the ones we printed, we got many more votes for Thousand-Year Door exciting folks the most. The hype for it is real!

CARTER'S CORNER

Hello again!

For the quiz answer, I was going to say a Tera Raid Den (which would be a lot like the Max Lair in the Crown Tundra), but from the trailers for The Indigo Disk, it seems like I'll be able to get at least 25 past Legendaries. And maybe an app that helps us complete PokéDexes faster? (I only have 28 Pokémon left to find in my Kitakami Dex, but most of them are very rare, or evolutions.)

I have five main gaming priorities in 2024:

1) Beat my brother Calvin's Violet file. (He beat my Scarlet file and got me a Koraidon, so I owe him a Miraidon.)

2) Beat Tears of the Kingdom.

3) Get all six medals in Mario Wonder.

4) 5-Star Super Mario 3D World, and . . .

5) 100% Super Mario Odyssey? Might be tricky. Power Moons on the Dark Side and in the Deep Woods are tricky/scary, plus getting all the outfits, souvenirs and stickers will be expensive!

I'll probably also do a speedrun of Super Mario Bros. Wonder. My record is three hours and seven minutes, and the current world record is one hour, 23 minutes (but that's with glitches).

Quiz Time! Which do I like more: Mario Wonder or Mario Odyssey? See you next time!

BEING FORCED TO LIE IN A GAME IS NO FUN

Hi there! I was just reading the review for the Pokémon Scarlet & Violet DLC and felt the need to reach out. I'm sure some people may find your review too critical of the story content, but I wholeheartedly agree. Giving a player the choice to be deceptive is one thing, but forcing it on them as the only option to progress the story bothers me in a game primarily for kids where the protagonist is a self-insert. Some kids won't be affected, or may just be mashing through the confirm button to get back to battles. I have to always be wary of content like this with my daughter (9) who has autism and struggles heavily with concepts of empathy and right-and-wrong choices. Video games have been hugely beneficial in reaching her and helping her open up, but content like this can just as easily steer her down a bad path. From one parent to another, I really appreciate your perspective on this review. Keep up the great work!
– TREVOR D.

Thanks for the positive feedback! I know the developers wanted to build up to an intimidating, unhinged final battle (see Kieran's crazed eyes above), but I seriously disliked how they did it.

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Matthew K.**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about Princess Peach!

QUESTION #1

Give us a ballpark estimate: How many times have you rescued Princess Peach over the years? Dozens of times? Hundreds? *Thousands?!*

QUESTION #2

In games where she's a hero instead of the damsel in distress, do you choose to play as the Princess? Why or why not?

QUESTION #3

Peach is suiting up in a lot of different outfits, with different powers, in her next game. What's one new outfit/power you would add to her arsenal?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #70" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win a copy of the all-new Princess Peach: Showtime! game. Good luck!

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KiRBY in... REMAKES & REIMAGININGS

BY MATTHEW TARANTO

The Legend of Zelda is Getting a Movie!

. . . but it's going to be a live-action one, instead of animated!?

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time.

After the record-shattering box office success of The Super Mario Bros. Movie following its theatrical debut this past April, everyone knew that another Nintendo franchise film was inevitable. Probably more than one! I'm sure several different movies related to the Big N's biggest brands are all in some phase of development behind closed doors as we speak. But one has just recently been brought out into the light and publicly confirmed.

"This is Miyamoto. I have been working on the live-action film of The Legend of Zelda for many years now with Avi Arad-san, who has produced many mega hit films. I have asked Avi-san to produce this film with me, and we have now officially started the development of the film with Nintendo itself heavily involved in the production. It will take time until its completion, but I hope you look forward to seeing it."

There it is, direct from the original creator of The Legend of Zelda himself – Shigeru Miyamoto took to social media on November 7, 2023, to share that message. A Zelda film is coming!

And it's not just the confirmation of a movie adaptation of the Zelda series – but a confirmation of its format too! Mr. Miyamoto specifically let everyone know that this is going to be a live-action film. So, real people. Actual actors. Genuine sweeping vistas of the landscape of the kingdom of Hyrule!

. . . Or, you know, at least CGI art of all those things made to look real.

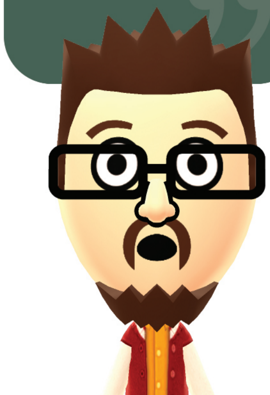
"Live-action" doesn't necessarily mean "nothing but practical movie-making effects" like it once did, years ago. These days shows like Disney's The Mandalorian are "live-action," but that one is filmed in "The Volume," Disney's massive oval-shaped green screen room that can make actors look like they're walking through any manner of alien environment, when actually they never leave the confines of a single studio sound stage. So how much live action will we get in this Zelda film? Will the actors actually fly around the world to film in different real locations? Or will they all just act against a digital backdrop and have everything truly fanciful added in after the fact? Fans are already starting to worry.

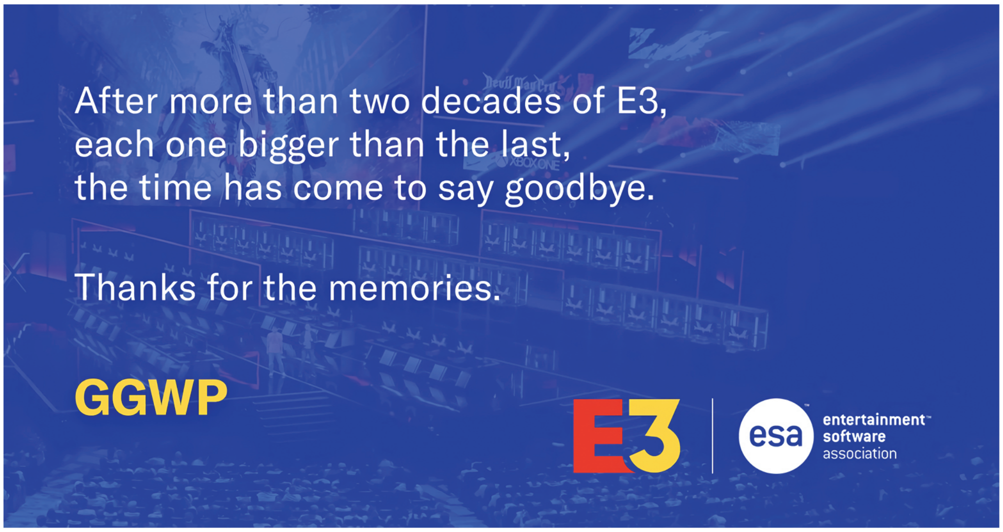
Most of the concerns are centered on casting, though. If Link and Zelda and Ganondorf are going to be played by real actors, which real actors should they be played by? Opinions have been flying since probably the very minute after Mr. Miyamoto's announcement was published.

Beyond that announcement, we do have some further tidbits of info to share. Wes Ball, a director who's done three Maze Runner films and who also helmed Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes (which opens on May 24), has been offered the director's chair. The writer of the film, Deadline reports, is Derek Connolly, whose past credits include the Detective Pikachu movie, Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker and all three of the Jurassic World films. Perhaps the most shocking tidbit of all, though? The Legend of Zelda film is being co-financed and distributed by Sony Pictures. Sony and Nintendo, working together! Mass hysteria!

Naturally, there have been a lot of hot takes and extreme reactions to all of the aspects of this massive news. So please flip ahead to Page 48 for an in-depth Film Club discussion! **– LUCAS**

> "That incredible new art up there is unrelated to the live-action Zelda film announcement, but I think capturing that same kind of epic spirit is going to be the real challenge for the filmmakers who are taking on this incredibly daunting task. I wish them luck, but my first instinct is that we'll likely get a dumpster fire! Yikes! – **LUCAS**"





E3 is Officially Dead

There will be no more Electronic Entertainment Expos, ever.

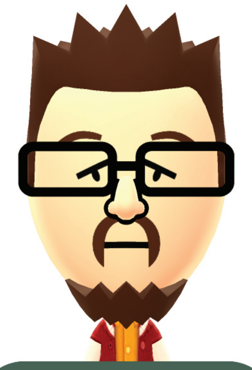
I HEAR YOU. I know. And I don't want to beat a dead horse any more either, but I do feel obligated to share this latest bit of news about the ongoing, prolonged death of E3 – because this time it's coming straight from the horse's mouth.

E3 is no more.

Officially! Finally. All future events have been cancelled and there are no more plans in place to revive the ailing Electronic Entertainment Expo. It's done – for good this time. E3 is a thing of the past.

I've made very nearly that same claim in these pages in the past, but on any occasion when I did so before, that was just my opinion. Seeing the writing on the wall. Calling it like I saw it. But now it's no longer just my perspective – it's an official announcement from E3 and the Entertainment Software Association. They sent out the image printed above via social media on December 12, 2023. "After more than two decades, each one bigger than the last, the time has come to say goodbye."

That's kind of a sappy way to reveal the end of the E3 era officially – and not even accurate, either, since not every expo actually was bigger than the one that preceded it. The show nosedived in attendance in 2007 and 2008 when they attempted to alter its format, and even after going back to the normal setup of press conferences and elaborate booths, it never reached its previous high point again. Not even after they started letting the public attend, in addition to journalists and game developers!



> "I've been a vocal critic of E3 for years, but I am saddened to hear that it will never get another chance to redeem itself. I attended five different E3s, starting over 20 years ago! It would've been nice to be able to go to even just one more. – LUCAS"

"Thanks for the memories." I will agree with that much, as for as flawed and mismanaged as E3 was over the years, it was still a magical place for many video game fans, myself included. It was also a critical networking event for industry professionals – we'll all be missing out on the deals that would've been struck over a late-night meal at the nearby Denny's! Video gaming, without E3, really will never be the same. **– LUCAS**

Aonuma Wraps it Up

The Game Awards honored Tears of the Kingdom, but awkwardly.

WITH THE FINAL nail now hammered into E3's coffin by the ESA itself, all eyes will likely turn to Geoff Keighley and his E3 rival Summer Game Fest to step up and become the new annual mainstay going forward. But . . . Geoff has his own problems he needs to deal with.

Keighley is also the head honcho of The Game Awards, the end-of-the-year award show that honors the best and brightest creators in the video game industry every December. At least, it's supposed to. The Game Awards broadcast each year is treated as essentially a Winter Game Fest, as it's packed with new game reveals and "World Premiere" trailers for upcoming titles, as well as live musical performances and appearances from celebrities. The actual awards are sprinkled between all of those other, flashier elements, and they understandably often don't get nearly as much time or attention as they deserve.

The 2023 Game Awards presentation was especially egregious in this regard. Several award winners were forced to fast-forward through their acceptance speeches, with music interrupting their words to try to play them off the stage, and the words "Please Wrap It Up" projected in front of speechmakers' eyes. Eiji Aonuma, while accepting the honor of Best Action/Adventure Game for The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, was hurried along in just that manner. He spoke only three sentences! Gonzo the Muppet got more screen time! Geoff needs to gets his priorities realigned, timewise. **– LUCAS**

I Need to Reach my Friend!

These Korok pals have gotten separated. Can you bring them back together?

WHEN I FIRST came across these little Koroks in Tears of the Kingdom, I knew I was in for a challenge. After a while, I dreaded seeing them! Why did they pack so much stuff into their packs? Why did they need such big tents? How did they get as far as they did, only to quit so close to the finish? The questions these little guys posed abounded, but the fact remained that Link needed to bring them back together. Sometimes that meant strapping them to a rocket and launching them into space first, but I'd say the majority did end up reaching their friends. Right?

There was obviously a lot of talk surrounding these guys from players playing the game, especially around launch. (Launch of the game, not the Koroks.) San-ei Boeki has decided that they're popular enough to warrant a set of plushes! These stand a little over 6.5 inches tall, but are wider and deeper than they are tall, at 8.5 inches wide and 7.3 inches deep. (Well, there's the reason why they can't walk right there. They must have just rolled to their stopping points. That should now be easy to simulate. Korok bowling, anyone?)

Each Korok comes with a little branch walking stick, a lantern, a cup, a rolled-up sleeping bag and whatever else is in that massive knapsack. I presume it's the tent, logs for the fire and other accoutrement. None of it looks removable, but the details are fun. One has a red backpack and the other is beige, and both appear just as they do in the game. Plushifying pixels is San-ei's master talent! (Though have you noticed all the Koroks have the same body shape?)

These will be released in mid-February in Japan at the cost of 3300 yen, which is around $23 each. Pre-orders are sure to start soon at your favorite importer. I'd suggest Amiami or HLJ, as there's no announcement of a Little Buddy localization yet.

Now we all need to make a pact to not destroy these little goobers with firecrackers, or chuck them into rivers, or do other nefarious things with them . . .

Wowie Zowie!

Elephant Mario has transformed into one perfectly plushy pachyderm!

I KNEW IT would happen! How could San-ei resist releasing an Elephant Mario plush? He's not just wearing a "suit" like when he used to become a raccoon or a frog – instead, he's actually metamorphosized into an all-new animal! Unfortunately the counterfeiters benefited from releasing their shoddy version on eBay before the holiday season. They even had Luigi, Peach and Toadette versions, along with a plethora of Wonder enemies. (Hopefully none of you bought that unlicensed tripe.) If you're worried about getting a fake, the real Elephant Mario plush has colored ridges on his trunk. (Or just avoid eBay.) The real deal will launch in late January for around $20. That's just peanuts! A Little Buddy version will most likely be brought over in the following months. Hopefully we'll see some other Wonder heroes or enemies made too, officially!

Expanded Statue Selection

The New Year will be filled with new pieces of home decor from First 4 Figures!

IT LOOKS LIKE it'll be a crowded back half of 2024 for First 4 Figures! They've recently announced a Samus Varia Suit PVC for Metroid Prime Remastered that has a light-up function that will cost $165. A version without the lights is $150. Joker from Persona 5 is also getting a PVC. Its Collector's Edition has interchangeable hands for $110, while the Definitive Edition has a light-up base that also features the masks of the Phantom Thieves for $300.

Sonic the Hedgehog (from the second movie) is getting a three-part series of statues. The first is the Blue Blur himself, and there are two versions per the norm: $340 for the regular and $370 for the version with glowy eyes.

Banjo-Kazooie is getting a "duet" statue featuring the bear and bird and their instruments. The regular version is $320. The Exclusive version includes some honeycomb props for $340. The Definitive Edition has Bottles and a frog on the base for $425.

What a lineup! RIP to your wallet if you're a fan of all four of these different franchises!

Bowser Rolls Out!

The latest LEGOs let you build King Koopa's cool car.

NOW THAT SONIC and Mario both have LEGO series, there's always plenty to talk about. In fact, they're releasing so many different sets it's hard to keep up with them all!

The newest releases include a LEGO Mario penguin family set that has a Goomba in a winter hat, and Nabbit joined the crew with a Yellow Toad shop set. Bowser's beefy muscle car from Super Mario 3D World has been faithfully recreated and is on sale as of January 1, for $30. It even has little bombs to throw out the back! Also new are Yoshi's Egg-cellent Forest Adventure that includes a pink and yellow Yoshi with a green Yoshi egg ($10), as well as Dorrie's Sunken Shipwreck featuring Dorrie, a Blooper, a Cheep Cheep and a Cheep Chomp ($45). The Cheep Chomp is able to eat Mario, Luigi and Peach for "fun digital reactions." The little clam with a scannable inside was a nice touch, too. Do you think we'll get Super Mario Bros. Wonder-themed sets? It would be tough to transform LEGO Mario into an elephant!

Seven Sonic sets released in 2023, including adventures in Green Hill Zone, Sonic battling Dr. Eggman's Death Egg Robot and Tails' Tornado plane. I love the idea behind smacking a button to release Sonic in a ball at enemies! LEGO never ceases to amaze. Even Amy and Shadow got sets of their own, and I have to say that the minifigs here are top-notch. The new set for 2024 is Knuckles' Guardian mech. It features a Master Emerald, Rouge the Bat and the titular mech, but I'm sure that won't be all for Sonic and friends in the coming year!

BY BRETT MARTIN

Super Nintendo World is Expanding!

The theme park is moving beyond just the Mushroom Kingdom with Donkey Kong Country!

IT'S WEIRD THAT Super Nintendo World is called Super Nintendo World. Don't you think?

A name like that calls to mind an image of some kind of Smash Bros.-like Candyland – a diverse celebration of all things Nintendo. All of their many different franchises.

But, so far, Super Nintendo World has pretty much just been Super Mario World. Only the Mushroom Kingdom has been explorable in Nintendo's in-person theme park that's now open at two different locations of Universal Studios: one in Osaka, Japan, and the other in Hollywood, California.

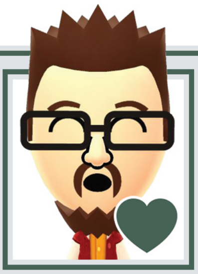
Thankfully, that's about to change! Though representation for all of the Big N's biggest brands is still a long ways off, Nintendo's theme park will at least be adding one more IP to their in-person experience this Spring: Donkey Kong! A new Donkey Kong Country area has been constructed in Osaka, and it will begin welcoming guests in just a few more months.

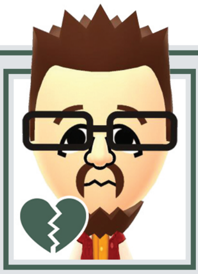
Visitors will exit the Mushroom Kingdom area by walking through the entrance seen to the left, and will then emerge into a lush, tropical jungle! DK's Treehouse will be a prominent centerpiece in the new area, and a shop inspired by Funky's Fly 'n' Buy from Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze will sell DK-inspired souvenirs. That may be the only Tropical Freeze reference, though, as most everything else seems directly inspired by the game before that one, Donkey Kong Country Returns, from Wii and 3DS.

A Golden Temple with a waterfall cascading out of the mouth of a huge, banana-crowned monkey will be another selfie-worthy sight to see, and it will also serve as the queueing area for visitors who want to ride the DK zone's new rollercoaster attraction: Mine Cart Madness! Inspired by the classic mine cart levels in the DKC games, this coaster's claim to fame is that, at one point, it will appear to "jump the track" as guests hang on for dear life. (It's just an optical illusion, of course. It should be perfectly safe! . . . I'll let you go first, though.)

Donkey Kong Country seems to not be coming to Super Nintendo World's Hollywood location, which stinks, but it *is* planned to be part of the Orlando, Florida location when that opens up in 2025. Maybe Orlando will have enough open land area to keep the expansions rolling in subsequent years. I just want an Ice Climber Expedition area! That's not too much to ask, right? **– LUCAS**

Great!
There's more to explore at Super Nintendo World!





Oh.
. . . But I've still got to get there to explore it.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

UBISOFT WILL BE first out of the gates with a major release in 2024, as their brand-new revival of the old Prince of Persia brand will arrive in the eShop and in physical form on Thursday, January 18. While storywise The Lost Crown is a new sequel not connected to past titles, gameplaywise it's a total reimagining of what 2D Prince of Persia can be! We've got one last pre-launch look prepared in the Previews section, on Page 32.

NINTENDO'S FIRST FIRST-PARTY fare of the New Year will follow after The Lost Crown by just one day, as Another Code: Recollection will begin to bring back memories of Trace Memory starting on January 19. We first previewed this one in our last issue, and this time we've got some direct screen comparisons to share on Pages 30 and 31.

JUSTICE WILL PREVAIL once again beginning on January 25, as Capcom brings their virtual courtroom back to order with the Apollo Justice Ace Attorney Trilogy. This collection contains a trio of titles first seen on the DS and 3DS, years ago: the fourth, fifth and sixth Ace Attorney sequels, which introduced new series protagonist Apollo Justice. (But don't worry, Phoenix Wright is still there too!) One last preview is ready on Page 33.

DO YOU HAVE any plans for this Valentine's Day? If not, Lara Croft will be happy to take you on an adventurous date – spelunking in dreary caves, exploring crumbling ruins and dodging gigantic dinosaurs! The first three Tomb Raider titles, icons of the '90s, are coming back on February 14. Take a closer look up ahead on Page 16!

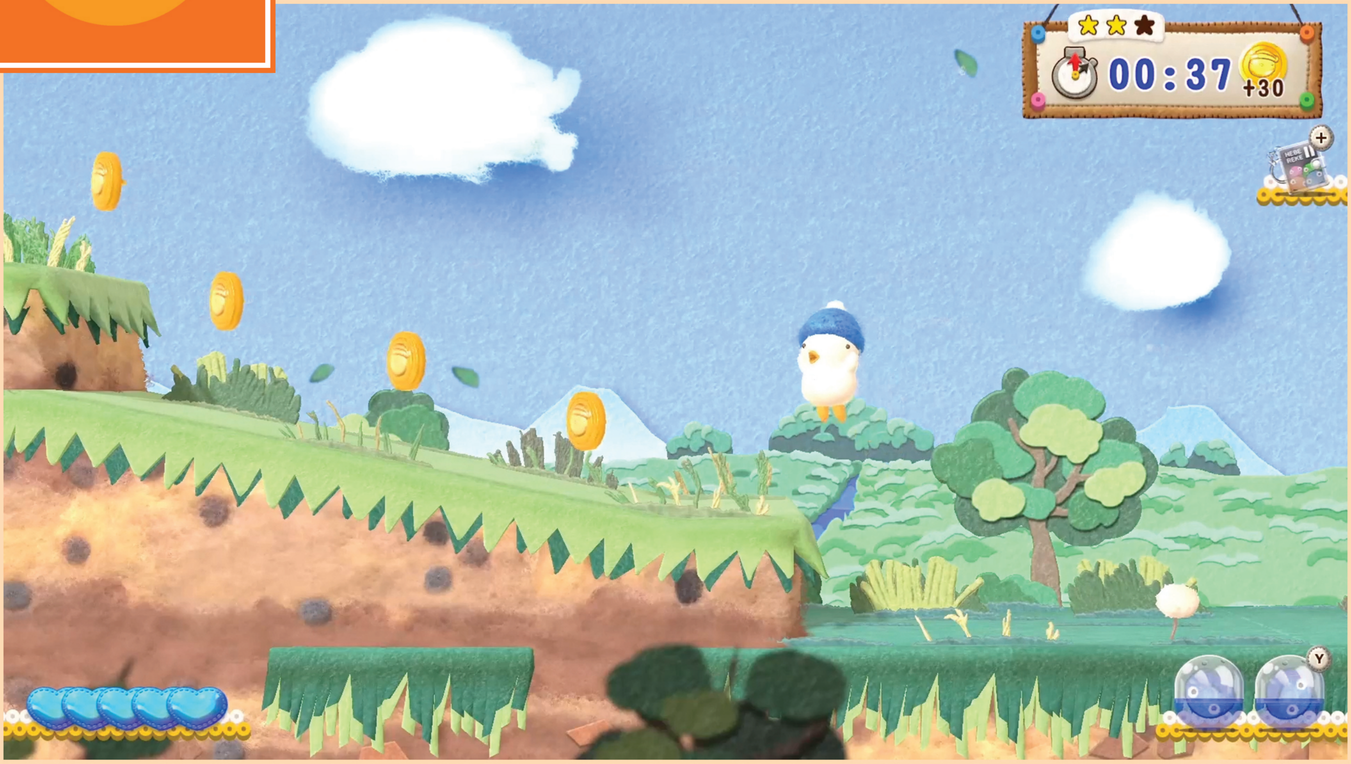
FRESH OFF THEIR furiously funny fight on the big screen in The Super Mario Bros. Movie, Mario and Donkey Kong will be coming to blows again beginning on February 16. This remake of 2004's Mario vs. Donkey Kong from the Game Boy Advance is looking beautifully snazzed-up, with eye-catchingly great new graphics. Go ahead and let it begin to catch your eyes, too, starting with our preview on Pages 28 and 29!

FINALLY, HERE'S A game that isn't a remaster or a remake (though you could make an argument that it is in part, since all the Shiren sequels kind of remake the original Mystery Dungeon gameplay). This game, which is Shiren 6, is set for February 27, and we preview it on Page 32. We've also got a late review of Shiren 5 for you to read on Page 68!

> Like old weather patterns repeating themselves, this Forecast full of games we've mostly seen before seems to suggest that the winds of change are just about ready to start blowing. How long into 2024 will we get before Nintendo finally reveals their Switch successor? Surely this has to be the year, right? There's no way we're getting all the way to 2025 without them acknowledging and announcing the next machine, right? *Right?* — **LUCAS**

THIS SIDE OF the line is sometimes still a Forecast and sometimes more of a recent weather report, and today you're getting the latter: Because the three N64 titles pictured below have already been added to the lineup on Nintendo Switch Online!

1080° Snowboarding is a classic first-party racer with a great sense of speed and sick tricks – I'd fire it up first. Jet Force Gemini is also a great time, as a one-off futuristic third-person shooter from Rare in their '90s golden age, just after GoldenEye. And Harvest Moon 64 is an unexpected extra surprise – choose it when you're ready to slow down and get mellow!



Restarting Sunsoft's Signature Saga

Hebereke is back with a brand-new sequel/remake/revival in Ufouria: The Saga 2.

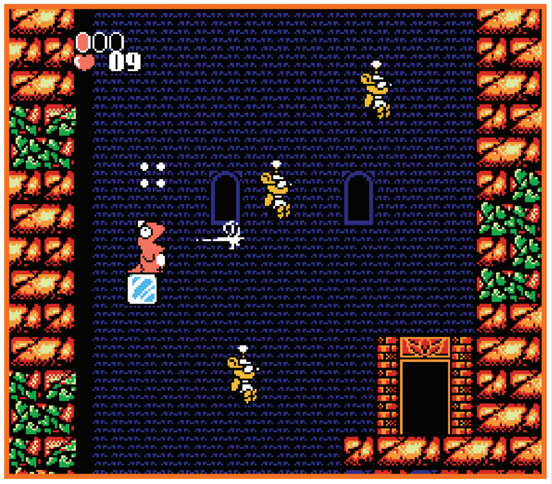
LET'S TRY TO untangle this twisted, confusing mess of a franchise.

Back in 1991, Sunsoft launched a game in Japan called Hebereke. An early Metroidvania, it let players explore an interconnected 8-bit world as four different playable characters: a floating, sunglasses-wearing ghost named Sukezaemon, a land-walking angler fish named Jennifer (who was male, despite that name), a little girl in a cat costume named O-Chan and the main mascot, Hebe, who was a cutesy all-white penguin wearing a blue beanie cap. The game was well-received in Japan and kicked off a long-running series of spin-offs there – but only there. Hebereke never really caught on in the West.

The original game did get localized for Europe in '92, though. There, it was called Ufouria: The Saga, and two of its main characters were swapped out. O-Chan, the cat girl, became "Freeon-Leon," an ice-breathing lizard man. And Hebe turned into "Bop-Louie," who still had a pale body and the same blue cap, but got huge, black bug eyes that made him look like an alien. (Or a cricket, says my 9-year-old.) Sukezaemon was renamed "Shades" and Jennifer became "Gil," but their graphics went unchanged.

Still with me? OK, Ufouria skipped the States in the NES era, but NOA did finally approve an American release of the game as a Wii Virtual Console title in 2010. By that point, Hebereke had gotten half a dozen more installments in Japan – though none of them were sequels to the original game. They were all side games in other genres, just using the same cast of characters, who became Sunsoft's mascots for a while! Only one of those spin-offs left Japan: Hebereke's Popoon, a puzzle game for the SNES that got a release in Europe in 1994. But that was just two years after Ufouria: The Saga, and they didn't reuse the Ufouria name?!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SUNSOFT RELEASE: FEBRUARY 28, 2024 RATING: RP



ORIGINALLY ONLY SEEN IN EUROPE

UFOURIA: THE SAGA

Combine the go-anywhere exploration of Metroid with the multiple playable characters of Super Mario Bros. 2 and you've got a general sense of what Ufouria: The Saga was like! It bested SMB2 by letting its players actively switch characters on the fly, though – you could use Bop-Louie for his faster speed for most of your general traversal, but then pause to swap to Freeon-Leon when you needed to swim or freeze a foe. Then back to Bop-Louie to keep on running along!

One fun feature was that you had to unlock the extra playable heroes by first beating them in a boss battle. They all had amnesia, you see, so you had to literally knock some sense back into them! After slapping them around enough, they'd remember that Bop-Louie was their friend and join his quest. Beyond that, the game was just odd: weird enemy designs, goofy graphics. It was a good time, and is a good candidate for a remake. Or a sequel. Or whatever this new game ends up being!

Seriously, they went to all the trouble of inventing the characters Bop-Louie and Freeon-Leon during the localization process, but cast them aside as soon as they wanted to sell a second game in the "saga" and were faced with having to redo all that work a second time. "Ufouria: The Saga" was left in the past.

. . . Until last year! As part of their big comeback tour, Sunsoft revealed that they're remaking the first-ever Hebereke adventure and giving it a gorgeous new visual style similar to the one seen in Yoshi's Woolly World, where all the characters and pieces of the environment look like they're made out of cuddly cloth. I got excited about that kind of revival, since I am a minor fan of the original. (I wrote the Wii VC review for IGN and I'm listed on its Wikipedia page, not to brag.)

But my excitement gave way to further confusion as Sunsoft offered more information, since this project is now called Hebereke 2 in Japan – and Ufouria: The Saga 2 for the West. Huh?

My first question: Is this new game supposed to be a remake of the old 8-bit adventure, as they claimed at first, or is it instead a full sequel, as that big number "2" in the titles implies? Is it somehow both, like we saw in Donkey Kong '94, which began with a remake of the original Donkey Kong but then kept going after that with a brand-new adventure?

My second question: Why's Sunsoft even bothering to bring back the "Ufouria: The Saga" branding for the West? They already abandoned it once before, 30 years ago, and it's not like it holds a lot of nostalgic weight. And they're not bringing back Bop-Louie and Freeon-Leon despite reusing that old Western name, so just, *why?*

Sunsoft is . . . silly. At best. But the confusion in branding and convoluted history of this franchise shouldn't hold this new game back from being worth checking out!

Ufouria: The Saga 2 should be a hop-and-bop, Metroidvania-esque platformer with four playable heroes, each with his/her own moves. If they keep the characters' old skill sets, then Hebe will be the fastest and able to climb up walls, O-Chan will be able to swim and handle slippery surfaces, Sukezaemon will be able to floatingly jump longer distances than the others and Jennifer will have full mobility underwater, just walking around while submerged. And also spitting up bombs – there's that too.

. . . I think I've confused myself even further. We'll get everything else untwisted when it launches! **– LUCAS**

Classic Crofts Recrafted

Lara's original PlayStation adventures are getting a visual revamp in Tomb Raider I-III Remastered.

ASPYR HAS ALWAYS known their niche.

Originally founded in the '90s, this Austin, Texas-based studio specialized in porting PC games to Mac systems to begin with. In the years that followed, they starting porting other titles to other systems. Then they began to develop and publish a handful of original titles . . . before jumping right back into the porting game. Aspyr's team knows their real strength!

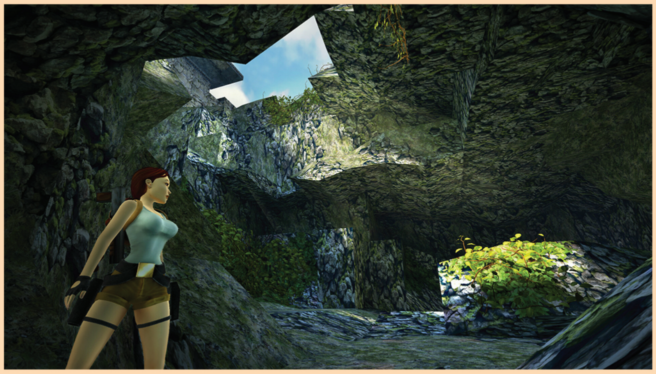
You may be familiar with their work thanks to their Star Wars re-releases in recent years, as they've brought titles like Republic Commando, The Force Unleashed and Knights of the Old Republic all to the Switch – and now they're working their same retro-resurrection magic on Tomb Raider!

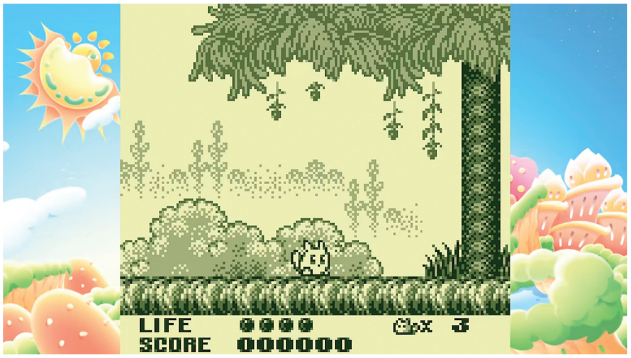
Lara Croft's original trilogy of titles aren't simply being ported, though. Aspyr is investing the extra effort to beautify each one, remastering their visuals with enhanced detail through higher-resolution textures and 3D models packed with extra polygons. It's not a total remake of the games – the geometry of each environment appears to be unchanged. It's just that everything is made prettier for you to look at.

But only if you choose that new look! You'll also have the option to play each of these three games with their original textures and models intact. (And they'll still look better, just because they're running on an HD system!)

Nintendo loyalists missed out on the Tomb Raider series in the '90s, and many of you may still have never played these games. Well, thanks to Aspyr, you'll now get another chance to do so! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ASPYR DEVELOPERS: ASPYR & CRYSTAL DYNAMICS RELEASE: FEBRUARY 14, 2024 RATING: M





Officially Colorized After 30 Years!

TRIP WORLD DX

THERE WERE FEW developers capable of pushing Nintendo's 8-bit hardware to its limits quite like Sunsoft. In the early '90s, they released some fantastic games that showcased their mastery of both the aging NES and Game Boy hardware, but some of them never saw release in North America. One of these, Trip World, is finally being brought to the West thanks to Limited Run Games, and the resulting experience is positively wonderful.

Trip World is an unusual game. It's remarkably short, and is simultaneously incredibly easy and shockingly difficult. It's a platformer where you take control of a small, rabbit-like creature named Yakopoo. Like any other platforming hero, Yakopoo can jump like a champ, and he even has a couple of transformations he can use at the press of a button – but his offensive capabilities are extremely limited.

Jumping on top of enemies does no good, and there's only one temporary power-up that gives you a more traditional tail swipe attack. The only thing Yakopoo can do on his own is a tiny little kick that barely reaches a few inches in front of him.

The good news there: Only a few of the creatures you encounter have any interest in attacking you. That's one of the more unique features of Trip World, since it changes how you approach the game: If you decide to attack a creature first, for the most part every one of them will, at most, push you around a little bit. (Except of course the bosses, who can be brutally challenging.)

There's no doubt some will find this makes the game pretty boring, and in truth there's very little actual content here. The whole thing can be finished in well under an hour once you've had some practice. But there's something truly enjoyable about exploring this game's world! Trip World is unusually beautiful by Game Boy standards! Everything is drawn and animates extraordinarily well. It's no exaggeration to say that it's one of the best-looking games to ever grace the system, if not *the* absolute best!

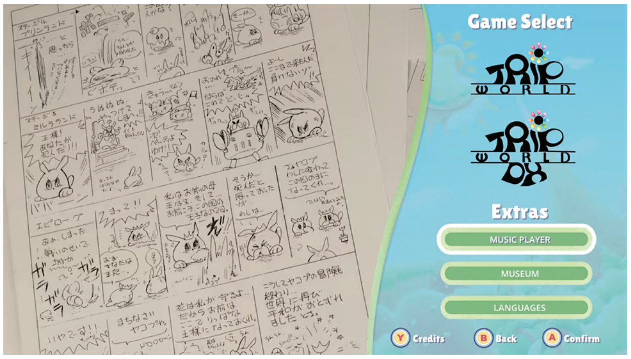
Unlike Sunsoft's previous retro release, Gimmick! Special Edition, this game doesn't suffer from dreadful input lag and a paltry set of extras. On the contrary, this release was made using Limited Run's new Carbon Engine, which results in a near-flawless emulation experience. Everything feels spot-on, with the exception of some strange audio glitches whenever you change screens. It's not game-ruining by any means, but it is pretty distracting.

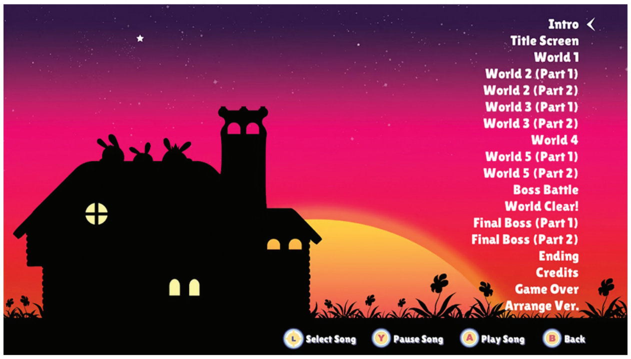
What makes this edition really stand out, though, is its array of extras. This release not only contains the original monochromatic Trip World, but the all-new Trip World DX, a fully colorized version of the game made in partnership with its original creator! There are various visual filters and borders available, all of which can be toggled on and off to your liking. It's got a rewind function, box and manual scans (though these have not been translated into English) and even an insightful developer interview.

Trip World DX is a terrific example of a retro game revival done right. Trip World itself is a wonderful, albeit tragically short, little game. All the accompanying special features elevate it to must-have status for anyone interested in off-beat Game Boy games. **– KRIS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SUNSOFT DEVELOPERS: LIMITED RUN GAMES & SUNSOFT RATING: E





Reimagining the Original Rail Shooter!

AIR TWISTER

ON PAPER, there's a lot to like about Air Twister: It's a modern take on Space Harrier, by the original game's creator, it's deeply weird and it looks like a blast. Unfortunately, playing the game left me with a very different feeling. For as much as I wanted this to work, it simply didn't.

Industry legend Yu Suzuki has claimed that Air Twister is not a spiritual successor to his beloved arcade classic Space Harrier, but that is absolutely not the case. From the basic gameplay, to certain near-identical enemies and environmental elements, to even the shape and color of the enemy laser blasts, Air Twister's Space Harrier DNA is impossible to deny. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, though – Space Harrier rules! It's just the new stuff that doesn't quite land.

For example, there's a weirdly big focus on ducks. Space ducks. Well, I suppose they're space *swans*, but whatever they are, they look ridiculous. There's nothing otherworldly about them. They're just normal, realistically detailed Earth swans, but big enough to ride, and in the midst of the giant mushrooms and wacky alien creatures flying about, they just look absurd, and not in a fun way.

As far as gameplay, it primarily pulls from Space Harrier in that it's an on-rails shooter where you control a floating person and shoot everything in sight, but it also incorporates a more modern lock-on system, similar to the likes of Panzer Dragoon or Star Fox 64. The action does indeed get pretty wild, but there's something about the game's overall visual style that lacks the intensity of Space Harrier's "Super Scaler" graphics, or the speed of the Panzer Dragoon and Star Fox games. Air Twister started life back in 2022 as a mobile game, and it really shows.

Then there's the music, which is really quite something. The best way I can describe it is "store brand Queen." This isn't just a stylistic generalization, either. These songs are so "almost but legally not quite" Queen songs, you can tell specifically which ones they're trying not to be on a song-by-song basis. I'm not saying Queen cover bands are *bad*, and I'm not even necessarily saying this music is bad, but it is a bad match for this game, and I found it unbelievably distracting.

The other big drawback is the lack of content: The main campaign can be beaten in under two hours! The intent seems to be for the game to be replayed for high scores and unlockable cosmetics, but that's a pretty big ask when the game is this bland.

Rail shooters like this absolutely can be done right in the modern day. Sin & Punishment: Star Successor for Wii is a terrific example. That game was also deeply bizarre, but it managed to make its awkward world work with stellar mechanics and impressive visual setpieces. Air Twister just comes off as shallow, which honestly breaks my heart.

I have no doubt that there will be players out there who completely disagree with this assessment. I'm sure there are folks who will boot up this game and think the space ducks and weird Queen-adjacent music is spectacular! But that's not me. For as eagerly as I was anticipating this game, I found getting through even its limited playtime to be a chore.
– KRIS

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ININ DEVELOPER: YS NET RATING: E10+

4.0

Reimagining the Original Futuristic Racer!

F-ZERO 99

YOU'D BE FORGIVEN if, in the 33 years since its release, you haven't thought too much about F-Zero. Nintendo sure hasn't! The last full game in the series was F-Zero GP Legend two decades ago, and the last real reference to it outside of Smash Bros. and WarioWare microgames was a playable minigame in Nintendo Land called Captain Falcon's Twister Race.

That is until the surprise Nintendo Direct announcement and subsequent release of F-Zero 99, the third game series to experience the "99" treatment after Tetris and Pac-Man. This iteration has a downright farcical 99 players funneled from the starting line into the actual track, and then quickly whittled down by exploding or being eliminated by placing too low. While Nintendo has slowly released more tracks over the course of several weeks, keeping the game fresher longer, there isn't anything new here per se – they just adapted the tracks from the SNES leagues to fit 99 racers.

Online is exactly what I expected, I suppose, but seeing that many racers battle for the top spot is pure chaos. While the game has various methods of gaining ground, the top spots rely heavily on luck early in the race. Managing to get a little ahead so you don't have to take a hard turn with 50 other racers is paramount to success. This requires good use of your power meter – a combined health and boost meter – and great knowledge of the track you're on to avoid damage. The annoying part is you can practice all day long and know a track inside and out, but if you get a bad bump from a foe it throws off your whole race.

Collecting sparks left by trading paint with enemies can fill another meter that allows you to soar to a separate track above the fray to use boost and avoid tougher obstacles. A new spin move reminiscent of Battle Mode in F-Zero X can also really clear a crowd, so a hefty amount of strategy has been added to the original game.

After a few laps, the race is over, which feels odd because most battle royale games have players play until there's only one left standing. In a game about power management, it may have been more interesting. Instead, coming in 60th feels like a slap in the face, and my first few times getting low places made me feel like I'd never see the Top 10.

A one-off race is short, chaotic fun, but the Grand Prix raises the stakes and the rewards. Racing five tracks while qualifying with your performance in the previous race is nerve-racking, but also fun. The cosmetic unlocks kept me playing for a while, but gameplay-affecting rewards were slow to accumulate, and the odd leveling system felt like grinding in an RPG. It would have felt more rewarding to get all the stuff for all racers instead of just the one you're using, even if I would never use them. Only having access to the original four vehicles from the SNES game – the Blue Falcon, Golden Fox, Wild Goose and Fire Stingray – is also a blow, as Nintendo could have easily retrofitted several of the racing crafts from other F-Zero installments' larger rosters.

F-Zero 99 has an interesting premise that suffers from its own self-imposed restrictions. The additions are welcome, but it can be frustrating not rising to the top after a lot of play due to some rewards needed to succeed requiring too much grinding. It's fun in spurts, but gets tiresome and repetitive quickly. **– BRETT**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

7.0

Break the Time Loop!

IN STARS AND TIME

IF YOU FOUND yourself trapped in a time loop with a chance to save your friends from an inevitable fate, would that be more of a blessing . . . or a curse? This is the question posed by the debut title from developer insertdisc5: In Stars and Time.

This monochromatic RPG is set at what feels like the end of a larger adventure, with a fully developed party beginning their final ascent through a sinister king's monster-filled tower. The wrinkles begin to emerge when our lead hero dies unexpectedly . . . and finds himself awakening at the start of the same day, armed with the knowledge of how to avoid his untimely death – the first of many trips through a mysteriously lethal time loop.

The low-hanging comparisons to specific classic and contemporary RPGs are initially tempting, but In Stars and Time differentiates its own personality with a creatively strong voice and sense of identity that weaves throughout its direction, narrative and writing. It's easy to fall in love with the delightfully diverse cast, ranging from the smug, pun-loving protagonist, Siffrin, to Bonnie, the literal child who hovers around the party to offer emotional support (and snacks). Over the course of the game, the humorous and light-hearted tone knows just when to step aside to allow heavier themes of fatalism and anxiety to take over as repeated trips through time begin to pile up.

Another surprise is found in the game's clever spin on classic turn-based combat. The usual Rock/Paper/Scissors balance of elements is traded in for attacks that literally take on the physical elements of rock, paper and scissors. Enemies you encounter give hints as to their elemental weakness based on subtle clues in how they hold their hands, or their physical appearances – an enemy with curled fists would be rock-type, for example. It's a genuinely fresh take on straightforward combat that helps to cut through some of the tedium of just how much time you can spend in these fights.

If the game has any significant shortcomings, its drawn-out length and pace may prove a significant barrier to some players – especially those with less experience who may just be playing for the story. While the game has an effectively thorough and diegetic tutorial for both its standard and unique RPG mechanics, the slow-paced fights are sometimes punishing in ways that demand an unexpectedly advanced understanding of the genre. It helps that there's a guaranteed run-from-battle option.

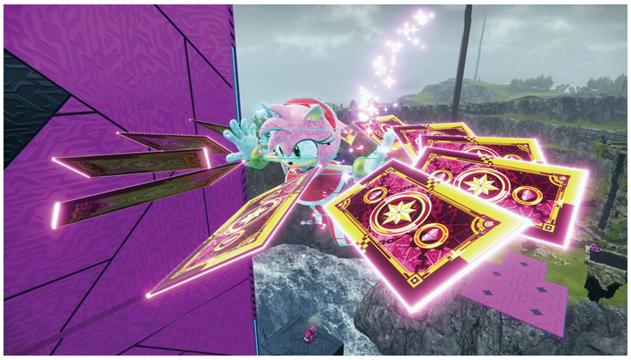
On top of that, some of the finer mechanical details of time travel ask for a surprising amount of mental juggling. Some progress carries over and is retained through each loop, while other elements confusingly don't, often requiring lengthy back-tracking through unchanged areas.

Chokepoints like these only stand out because the writing is so strong and accessible. The game feels like it'd be served well by an easier narrative mode or fast-forward options for players who may not have the skill or patience for frequent minor battles with unpredictable difficulty spikes. The lack of features like this stands out since there *are* mechanics for skipping through repeated dialogue and some locked doors.

In Stars and Time is fascinating. Many of its cleverest concepts are undermined by overwhelming mechanics, but the gripping story, charming visuals and fully realized cast are certainly the biggest draws and the motivators to stick it out to the end. There's an extremely personal story here that's yearning to be told, and for very good reason.
– JOHN-CHARLES

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ARMOR GAMES
DEVELOPER: INSERTDISC5
RATING: T

7.5



Feel Free to Not Make Space for This Final Frontier

SONIC FRONTIERS: THE FINAL HORIZON

AS SONIC TEAM updated Sonic Frontiers with new tweaks, modes and collectables over the past year, my appreciation for the game only blossomed further. All that was left to do was to stick the landing with one massive culmination of lessons learned and feedback received.

So . . . *wha' happun'!?*

From the moment you step onto Final Horizon's alternate endgame path – accessed via a portal on Ouranos Island – it's just one poorly baked design decision after the next. And the best way to convey that sensation of whiplash in written words is to chronologically recount my own miserable journey.

sigh Let's get this over with.

I'm Amy Rose. All her stats are at Level 1, and she has her own Skill Tree. I'm collecting a dump truck of Skill Pieces from backpack-wearing Koco strewn about. The game acknowledges that I don't want to grind again after already maxing out Sonic, so why bother with the experience system here if I'm essentially given a FastPass?

Knuckles now. I can't go back to Amy until some point later. Knux is also at Level 1. Each character has color-coded Skill Pieces and map Challenges that the others can't access. (Having serious Donkey Kong 64 flashbacks.) Knuckles' climbing is so jerky! This control scheme doesn't jive with the non-Sonic crew at all!

Tails time. His flight ability also feels all kinds of wrong. Wait, Tails can't use the Homing Attack!? I never realized how much I depend on that function until it's stripped away. Will I ever take control of the others again?

Back to Sonic, I suppose. Better climb these Trial Towers. Unlike the ones on Rhea Island, however, there are no shortcuts, so my head feels like it'll burst every time I fall. (I didn't realize I was playing Only Up!) Can't skip them, unfortunately. At least I can ignore the new Cyber Space courses. These too are needlessly long, with exhausting Missions like collecting Silver Moon Rings that disappear if I'm not fast enough, forcing me to replay the entire stage again because – you guessed it! – no checkpoints.

Some of the enhanced enemies require that I exploit the game's busted combat with otherworldly precision. Even my maxed-out hedgie can merely chip away at some of them! Who approved this balancing!? Now I must fight the first three Titans again back-to-back on a single Ring counter, with no ability to gather more, and restricted to countering only with . . . Perfect Parries!? The game has *never* once required this before! The frame window is narrow enough on Easy difficulty, but on Hard!? (Where's Daigo when I need him?)

Only before the final boss am I finally allowed to swap characters at will. What's the point of further leveling when they don't even participate in the last battle? Gotta instead focus my energies into more of those stupid Parries, while also struggling to intuit what mysterious sequence of actions will actually trigger the next phase. (Thanks, Sega! You made me hate Super Sonic!)

Well, at least Final Horizon is free. That's some solace, right? **– TONY**

3.0

DLC PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM RATING: E

Avoid the Void

SOLAR ASH

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER, a stylish top-down action adventure with a vaporwave aesthetic, successfully planted studio Heart Machine on the indie darling map. The team now hopes to adapt their freshman effort's combat and mood into the third dimension with a sequel, Hyper Light Breaker. However, while that game's still in development, they've spared some effort to create this game as a companion piece.

Solar Ash retains the retro-future color scheme of Drifter, but ditches the pixel art for sweet 3D models. It also eschews pure combat in favor of platforming and a heavier emphasis on storytelling. That isn't to say it lacks difficulty and tension; simply that major gameplay beats are structured around contemplative self-reflection – like a sci-fi-themed Shadow of the Colossus, only with more dialogue.

The adventure revolves around the Voidrunner Rei, a member of a team of explorers on a mission to collapse the Ultravoid, a massive black hole threatening to swallow their home planet. Her team is scattered immediately, leaving Rei to navigate the bizarre realm within the Ultravoid alone, seeking clues regarding her allies' fates and battling massive titans called Remnants that stand in the way of her primary objective.

The detritus of a once-thriving society lays before her, suspended atop surprisingly firm clouds that twist and bend in mockery of gravity. Rei skates across this puffy landscape using air shoes seemingly borrowed from Shadow the Hedgehog – she can also grind on rails, though her ability to hop between tracks is nowhere near as smooth as that of her rodent idol. As Rei's mirthful shouts demonstrate, she takes great pleasure in "jet setting" about, even in the face of this most solemn of missions.

What's not as joyful is the lack of an intelligent camera system. The nature of exploration – boost-jumping across gaps, scaling walls, running along routes that both wrap around tight corners and literally flip the world on its side – means that your view is more often than not directed away from wherever your attention ought to be, forcing constant manual adjustment. The settings menu does present the option to recenter the camera behind Rei automatically, but it's oddly split across two toggles: one for cloud traversal, the other for movement on solid surfaces. And while the cloud toggle works as it should, the other just . . . doesn't. Clearly a major development oversight.

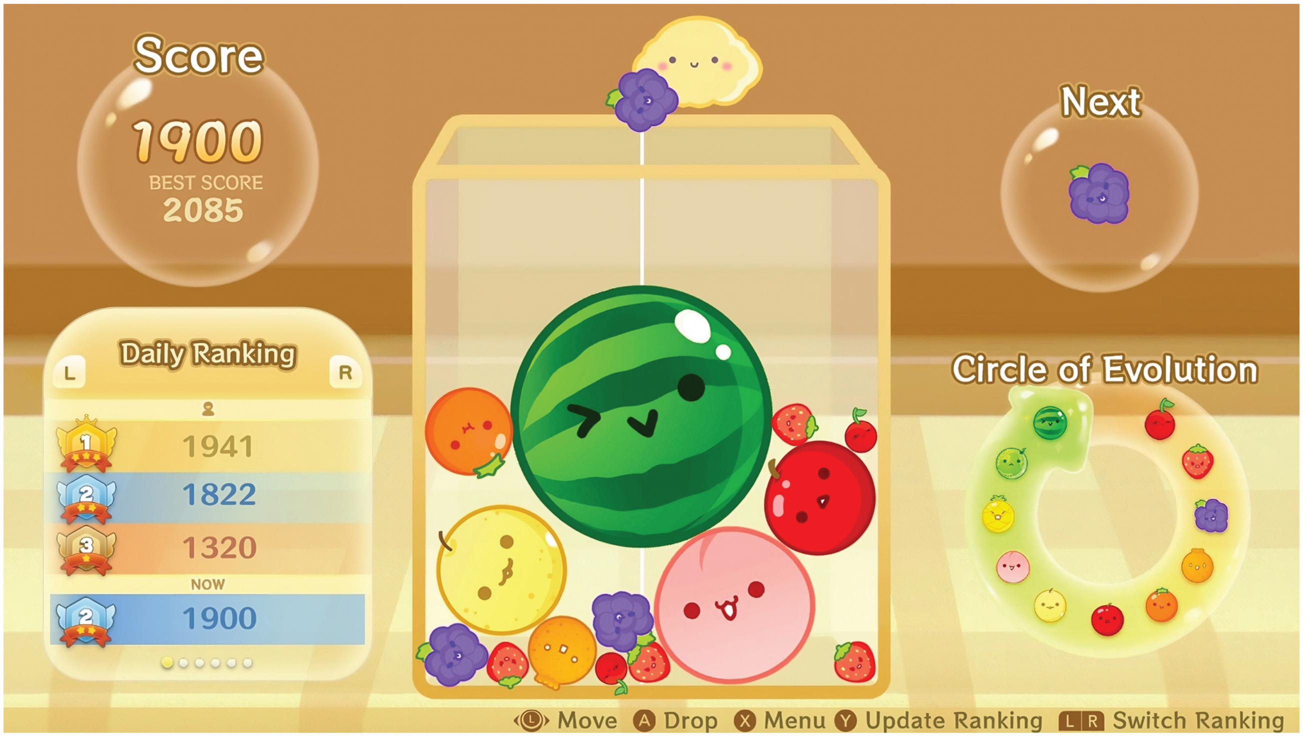
Once you get past Solar Ash's neon-drenched vistas and equally haunting synth score, you settle into a banal loop that never quite grows in complexity. Your sole task from start to finish is to clear "Black Ooze" challenges, in which you must slash nodes along puddles of living sludge within a limited window to then reveal a giant eyeball and give it the kebab treatment. Stab the requisite number of eyes to awaken the local Remnant, which is less a boss and more a moving platform upon which to cleanse additional Black Ooze. The only difference between early challenges and late-game ones are the number of nodes you must attack and the length of time to do so. Such monotony feels at odds with the gravitas of Rei's ordeal.

At least the voice acting is phenomenal! From the audio logs recounting her friends' exploits to the neurotic survivors she meets along her journey to the woman herself, every performance is rich in emotion and nuance. And though the story itself remains mostly vague throughout, overflowing with no shortage of sci-fi technobabble, you can't say these characters don't sell the pants off it!

Solar Ash is a decent teaser of elements we can expect to see expanded upon in Hyper Light Breaker (whenever that game ends up making its entrance in the future). It's enjoyable enough as an intermission, but that's about it. **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ANNAPURNA INT.
DEVELOPER: HEART MACHINE
RATING: T

6.0



Japan's Popular Produce-Producing Puzzler

SUIKA GAME

THE BALANCE OF online influence has shifted! Flesh-and-blood streamers like Markiplier and Jacksepticeye have had their tastemaker crown stolen by the parade of colorful VTubers who've flooded the net in recent years – and lately, these anime queens are all about smashing fruits together!

Named after the Japanese word for watermelon, Suika Game was originally developed as an app for the Aladdin X Corporation's line of digital projectors, earning enough enthusiast praise to receive a Switch port in December 2021. Its viral explosion arrived in early 2023 as Japanese content creators – chiefly the aforementioned VTubers – started streaming the game, in turn captivating international viewers who scrambled to obtain Japanese eShop cards. Now with a proper Western localization and (as of this writing) nearly 5,000,000 in global sales, it's impossible to tune into Twitch or YouTube Gaming without tripping over someone's Suika Game marathon.

Suika Game is so deceptively ordinary that you'd be forgiven for discounting it as minimum-effort shovelware at first blush. It's not dissimilar to classic mobile hits Threes! and 2048, conceptually, only instead of matching numbers to generate larger ones, players merge like fruits – combine two cherries to get a grape, two grapes for a strawberry and so on all the way up to the elusive watermelon. The artwork, cute as it may be, is also extremely basic, as is the single cloying music track that doesn't even loop properly. There aren't even additional gameplay styles aside from the sole score attack mode!

However, you need only watch any of the myriad YouTube rage compilations that showcase its true insidious nature to understand why so many players are willing to fight tooth and nail for a spot on the global leaderboard. Two key attributes lend Suika Game its sinister aura: First, fruits don't rigidly lock into position like Tetris blocks but instead adhere to physics, constantly shifting around the container even as you plan your next drop. And second, the smaller the fruits, the heavier they are, and as such they have a nasty habit of wedging into inconvenient spaces or sinking to the bottom. All it takes is a couple nasty little berries preventing any of your voluminous peaches from connecting to kneecap the run of your life.

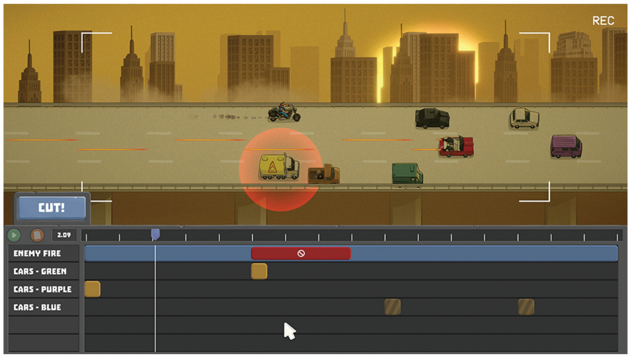
Also note that all the cautious area management in the world will be for naught should a stray cherry happen to occupy the space where a fused apple is forming, thereby yeeting it off the screen at escape velocity. It doesn't matter how empty your container otherwise is; once that propelled produce pierces the upper boundary, it's game over!

By now, you're probably thinking this game is only worthy as a source of schadenfreude entertainment. Yes, this cutesy puzzler may refuse to pull its punches, but at the same time, there's no pressing time limit or any other comparable stress mechanic. You're able to take your time and strategize – and for your effort, you just may pull a few points ahead of your previous best session! Besides, aren't you curious to find out what happens when you spawn two watermelons and make 'em kiss?

It's possible I may be too deep down the VTuber rabbit hole to judge Suika Game entirely objectively – experiencing the latest gaming craze alongside one's oshi is its own joy, after all. But whatevs! I had fun! You will too! **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ALADDIN X RATING: E

8.0



Assembling the Perfect Scene

IT'S A WRAP!

EVERY ONCE IN a while a game will come out that is a breath of fresh air for a genre. It's a Wrap! has a fantastic new take on puzzle platformers, and it's basically just video editing! Nearly everyone has played around with some form of video editing when posting on social media, so making it a video game mechanic is not only intuitive, but brilliant.

The game starts out with players believing it's just another platformer, but then the main character, movie star Johnny Rush, strolls onto a film set and the screen splits. Suddenly the player is the director, viewing the set with editing software at the ready, staging the scene for Johnny to haplessly try and survive.

There are elements to manipulate that differ in each scene – for example, one layer might control the movements of a boulder, while another controls a platform. You arrange all their motions relative to one another. Then, once things are set, players must play as Johnny to see if their editing prowess paid off, interacting with all the other moving parts. Mess up and the director calls "CUT!", sending Johnny back to the beginning after a spectacular injury. It's all very fresh and funny, and again, a totally brilliant concept.

Between scenes, the cast and crew have some funny interactions, making you want to keep playing.

There are three '80s-style movies to direct and star in, with the last two unlocked by playing the first. Each one has scenes referencing big names like Indiana Jones, Die Hard, Star Wars, Blade Runner and more. Each scene grows in complexity as you progress, and it was often easy to see what was needed to reach the goal, but difficult to stage it properly so everything came together.

Luckily the game has a built-in hint system! First, players can unlock lines in the script by asking for a hint in the pause menu. If that doesn't clue them in, each layer of the editor can also be selected for a hint, and the game will place that layer where it needs to be and lock it. I was so close to finishing the scene with the sand worm, but once I locked in one layer it made sense why I was failing.

Easily the levels with the most fun are the ones where you're trying to stop bad guys from getting to Johnny. A mine cart level had me crushing enemies with boulders or hitting a switch to send their carts into the lava. Watching each scene attempt to play out was hilarious and also had a dash of deviousness to it.

I know there's something special about a game when I finish it and I'm sad it's over. Only three movies? I would've liked five, or even more, to ramp up the difficulty a bit slower, or just to get more of the gameplay. The animation can be rough, the music is prosaic and the game oddly mixes full voices with grunts and grumbles, but it's all serviceable and doesn't get in the way of the brilliance. It's definitely worth the $18 entry ticket! **– BRETT**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: AMC GAMES
DEVELOPER: CHANKO STUDIOS
RATING: E10+

Serving the Perfect Sushi

DAVE THE DIVER

JUST THIS ONCE, I've brought back the "peanut butter & chocolate" banner from 20 issues ago at the top of this page – since Dave the Diver is another perfect example of two different genres being fused together to make something entirely new and totally tasty.

At times, this game is all about underwater exploration. Playing as the titular Dave, you dive into a semi-randomly generated ocean environment to seek out new varieties of fish to catch. You manage your level of oxygen, keep your eyes peeled for hidden treasures on the sea floor, fire your harpoon gun to snag exotic species and, when you've gathered enough specimens, you activate an escape pod to bring you back to the surface.

After that, the second half of the gameplay equation kicks in: Using the fish you brought in, you supply the menu for an exclusive sushi restaurant! Dave works as a waiter to take and deliver orders, serving the fish he just caught earlier that day.

As customers consume the latest and greatest sushi dishes, they pay their bills and Dave takes his cut of the profits . . . which he can then use to buy better diving equipment. Dave the Diver has this incredibly addictive gameplay loop, where your success during diving fuels the sushi restaurant, and happy customers at the sushi restaurant facilitate longer and deeper dives.

Dave the Diver first made a splash on Steam last summer, as it got its hooks into players and wouldn't let them go. I held off on trying that PC version, preferring to wait for this Switch port to surface. But now that I've finally dived in, I understand why it was getting so much praise!

That addictive gameplay loop is the core of the appeal here, but there are other noteworthy positives to point out too. Dave the Diver has incredible cutscenes – gloriously rendered in pristine pixel art and often genuinely comical, each one is a joy to watch when they pop up. It's a perfect portable game for when you're on the go, as you can play it for just one dive's worth of time or one restaurant shift and then pack it away again. It's got a surprisingly interesting story! You're not just diving down over and over again with no narrative reason for doing so – there's research to be completed, discoveries to be made and some true horrors lurking in the deep!

But now a negative or two.

Dave the Diver starts simply, but then it piles on tons of extra systems and menus – to the point where it really gets to be too much. Dave's in-game smartphone gets filled up with apps, each one of which has some kind of side-game functionality attached to it, and I had trouble keeping up with them all. That same sense of being overwhelmed hit me during the restaurant scenes too – for whatever reason I felt more tense when surrounded by hungry patrons than I did when surrounded by hungry sharks! It's hard to keep up with everyone's orders, fill up their drinks, keep enough wasabi ready . . . I respect waitstaff more now!

The good points of Dave the Diver far outweigh the few bad ones, of course, so I fully recommend this new peanut butter & chocolate genre fusion. Dive right in! **– LUCAS**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NEXON
DEVELOPER: MINTROCKET
RATING: E10+

Another Kart Era Comes to an End

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE: BOOSTER COURSE PASS – WAVE 6

NEARLY A DECADE after its Wii U debut, Mario Kart 8 has finally found its finish line: The last wave of DLC is now live. In total, the Booster Course Pass has added 48 new racetracks to the game, doubling the number that were in the already-expanded base game of Mario Kart 8 Deluxe (which is nearly seven years old itself). And the generation-ending pack of eight last tracks is a solid set.

My favorite of the bunch is the reimagined Bowser Castle 3, which takes the blocky, rectangular source material of the original from the SNES Super Mario Kart and wildly upgrades it with anti-grav segments and steep elevation changes. This series has really come a long way, and the nostalgia of this track (and its killer remixed music) put a huge grin on my face.

Nearly as smile-bringing is the latest revamped Rainbow Road, from Mario Kart Wii – but it loses some luster just due to the fact that Mario Kart 8 Deluxe already has four other Rainbow Road tracks in the mix. It's hard for it to feel like the grand finale it's meant to be when its same magic has already been tapped into so many times before.

I'll happily race on all Rainbow Roads rather than tiresome Tour tracks, though! Wave 6 has added two final real-world cities to race through – Rome and Madrid – for a total of 14 across the whole Booster Course Pass. These last two are fine, I suppose, but not too interesting – Madrid has you race into a gigantic soccer stadium and dodge huge balls that are bouncing around, but that only happens on one lap and it's over in just a few seconds. You're almost instantly spit back out into yet more urban streets, and we've just seen more than enough of those.

I wish the Tour tracks hadn't been so city-focused! Why represent the planet Earth only with its biggest population centers? If these tracks had expanded their scope and had designs inspired by the entirety of Italy or Spain or Japan or Australia, they could've been so much more interesting. Alas. Maybe next time.

DK Mountain from Double Dash!!, Rosalina's Ice World from MK7 and the new course Piranha Plant Cove are all highlights here as well, while MK Wii's Daisy Circuit is pleasant, but unmemorable. On the whole this is a fine final set, if not the best of the six different Waves.

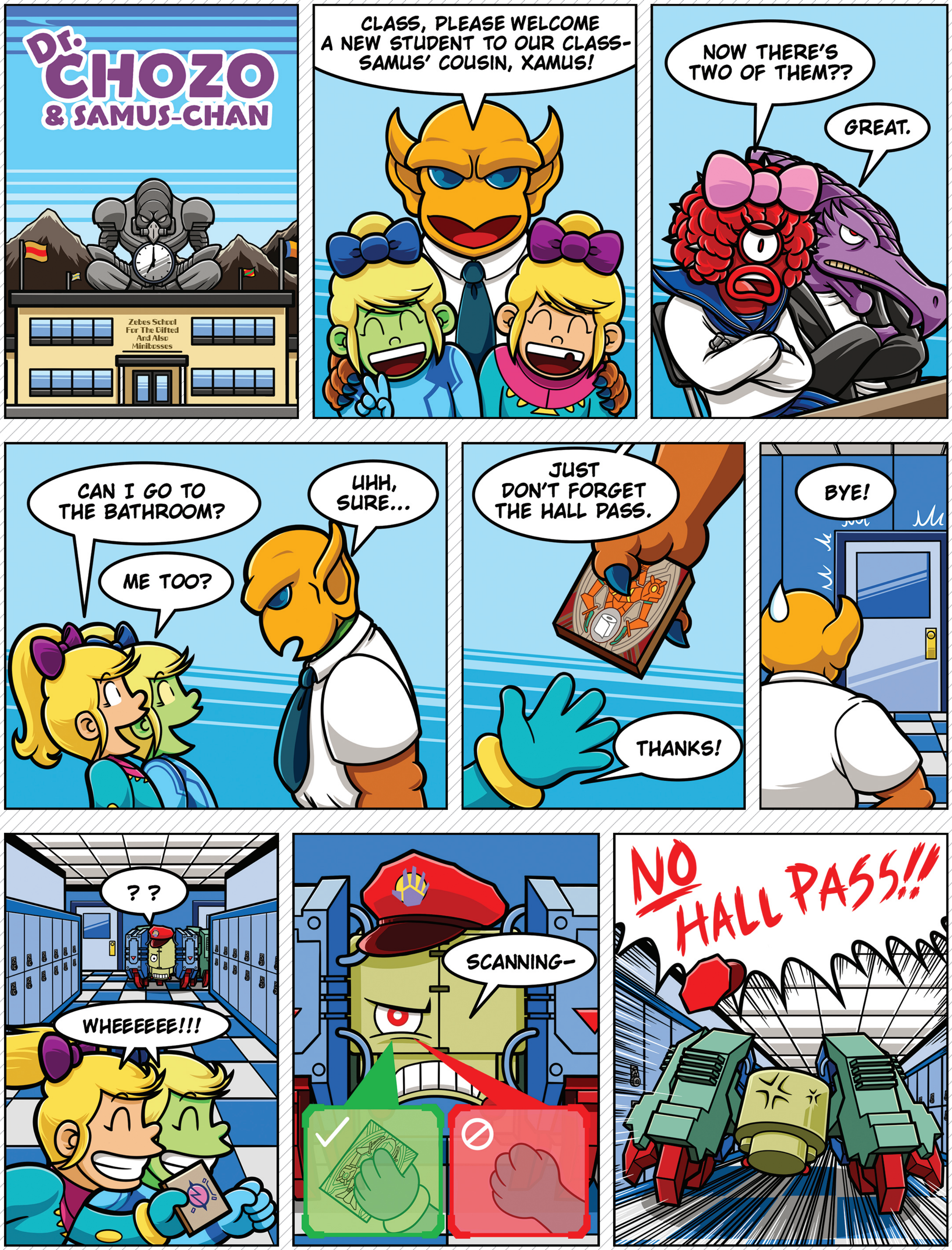
The real highlight of this last bit of DLC comes through the character select screen, though! Diddy, Funky, Pauline and Peachette have all arrived in the roster at long last, and the developers additionally added a total of 18 new Mii costumes, which was an unexpected but welcome surprise. I prefer to race as my own Mii, actually, and now I can suit him up like a Cheep Cheep or a Blooper!

The new Mii costumes even come equipped with custom animations – when tricking off a ramp while in the Dolphin gear, for instance, your Mii may flop like a fish! That's just a little extra touch of fun. A cherry on top of this whole Kart generation!

It took nearly 10 years, but we can now finally close the book on the Mario Kart 8 development cycle and begin to look ahead to what's next for this series. If rumors are to be believed, Nintendo's already deep in development of the next sequel, and they're sparing no expense on it! Here's hoping Booster Pass sales have boosted that budget! **– LUCAS**

9.0

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E



BY THOR THORVALDSON

SWITCH

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG

Nintendo's original rivals are duking it out again, in an HD remaster!

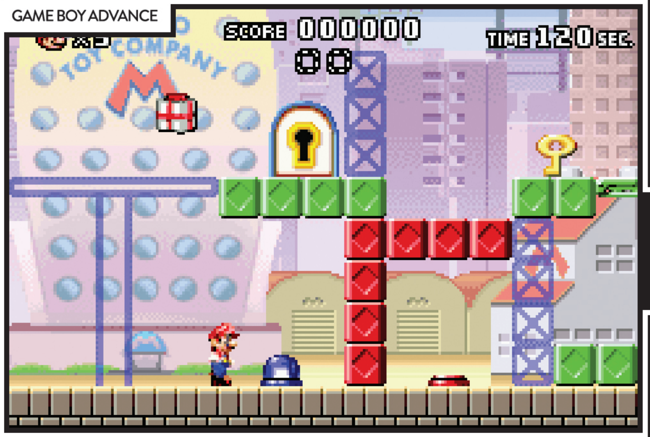
THE BIG APE is up to his old tricks. Donkey Kong's gotten jealous! He's been aggravated by the success of his '80s-era adversary Mario, and so he takes action: He breaks into Mario's toy factory and steals all of his toys!

Mario, of course, can't let that kind of behavior go unanswered. So he sets out on a quest to recover all of his company's burgled inventory – and bop that big ape one more time, to knock some sense back into him!

Mario vs. Donkey Kong is a vintage adventure, having first been published as a Game Boy Advance game almost exactly 20 years ago, in May 2004. It made two encore appearances after that, as a 3DS Ambassador game in 2011 and a Virtual Console release on the Wii U in 2017. Still, even with three releases, it's a lesser-known game!

The Switch may be the key to giving it the larger audience it deserves – and it'll get that chance in February, when the game will be relaunched for a fourth time. But with brand-new HD graphics for the first time! Mario vs. Donkey Kong has gotten a top-to-bottom visual overhaul. The game's the same, but everything looks nicer!

GAME BOY ADVANCE



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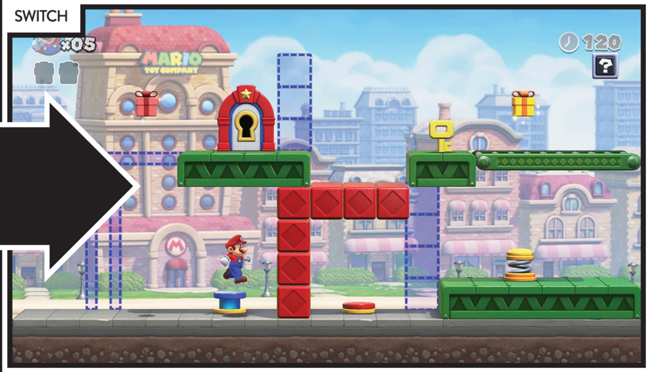
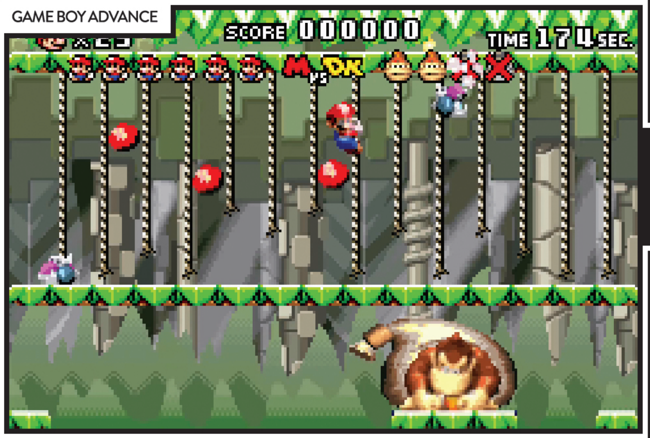




GAME BOY ADVANCE

SWITCH

Mario vs. Donkey Kong was kind of a rejoining of the two diverging branches that the overall DK series had split into in the '90s: There was Donkey Kong '94 on the Game Boy, which played like an evolution of the original Donkey Kong arcade game from 1981, and there was Donkey Kong Country, which totally went wild and invented a new kind of sidescrolling platformer experience starring the grinning gorilla. Mario vs. Donkey Kong was primarily positioned as a sequel to Donkey Kong '94, further emphasizing its puzzle-solving and having players play as Mario while fighting against DK – but it also roped in some of the DKC branch's influence as well, since its graphics were all made in the Rare-inspired style of "prerendered 3D models made into 2D sprites." The result was solid puzzle/platformer gameplay, but a kind of muddy visual experience – at the low resolution of the GBA display, many of the characters and objects in Mario vs. Donkey Kong just looked like a jumbled mess of pixels. It didn't look too bad in motion, but still screens like the pair we've printed here weren't (and still aren't) too appealing.

All that to say, this one was a great candidate for an HD remaster. Every element is now much cleaner, easier to parse and more expressively animated – especially Mario himself, who now moves with impressive fluidity for each of his many different jumps.

He's got his basic hops, sure. But he can also do a double jump, and a triple that spins through the air if you time it just right. He can do backflips that let him quickly spring up to higher platforms than he'd normally be able to reach. He can do a handstand – which protects him from objects falling from above, as he just kicks them away – and then he can spring out of that with yet another kind of jump. He's still the original Jumpman after all!

Mario's multi-faceted mobility is the core of this game's gameplay, and players have to put it to use in four different kinds of stages.

First up? Key retrieval levels. In these, you've got to first maneuver Mario through some kind of obstacle course to grab a key. Then you've got to carry, toss or otherwise transport that key all the way to a locked door – and get Mario himself to that door too – in order to end the level.

Second is the Mini-Mario rescue levels. They're more straightforward, as Mario just needs to reach the Mini-Mario that's waiting somewhere in the stage and touch it to rescue it. (The Mini-Marios are little wind-up toy versions of Mario himself, and those are the toys Donkey Kong stole to kick off this whole quest in the first place.)

After you've played six key missions and rescued six Mini-Mario toys, you'll get the third kind of stage: the escort missions! The six little Mini-Marios will trail behind Mario, and it's up to you to get as many of them safely to the exit – a toy box – as possible. Every little guy you safely stow in the box then transforms into one health point for Mario in the stage that follows immediately afterward:

The boss battles! This is where the "vs. Donkey Kong" comes into play, as they're mano-a-monkeyo brawls in which you must hit DK several times.

That gameplay variety keeps things from ever feeling too stale as you make your way through Mario vs. Donkey Kong. And actually, the new Switch version is adding one fresh wrinkle of its own: a co-op mode! Two players can take on the levels at the same time, with one controlling Mario and the other directing Toad. I'm not sure how that'll feel since all of these levels were made solely with solo players in mind two decades ago, but I'm willing to give it a whirl.

The Mini-Mario escort levels might be a little odd with two players, though. I guess the toys will follow Player 1 and just ignore Player 2's presence? Or will we get a few Mini-Toad toys added to the mix when using this fresh co-op feature?

So Mario vs. Donkey Kong is mostly a remaster, but it's got a few new tricks up its sleeve. Unlike DK himself. He's only got the old ones! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NST RELEASE: FEBRUARY 16, 2024 RATING: E

ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & CING
RELEASE: JANUARY 19, 2024 RATING: T

Trace Memory has been revived, renamed and reimagined!

SHE THOUGHT HER Dad was dead.

That's what she'd been told, after all. For 11 years, ever since she'd been dumped at Aunt Jessica's door by her Dad, Aunt Jessica had claimed that he was dead. But he wasn't dead! He was just a deadbeat.

As her 14th birthday approached, Ashley got a package in the mail. In it was a letter – from her Dad.

The first Another Code game kicks off its quest with this question: If her Dad was really alive all this time, why did he not want Ashley to know that? Why did he just drop her off with her aunt and then disappear, for over a decade? The letter he sent as his first communication in 11 years was an invitation that might lead to an answer – an invitation to Blood Edward Island.

This same tale was first told in 2005, in the DS game we in North America first got to play under the name Trace Memory. Now that it's been remade for the Nintendo Switch, it's been given a rebranding, bringing it back in line with the name that was used for it in Europe all those years ago: Another Code: Two Memories.

The subtitle refers, I think, to two different characters' repressed memories from their early childhoods. Even before the game gets into her Dad leaving her behind for some unexplained reason, Ashley's story starts with a cryptic flashback of what seems to be her as a 3-year-old, witnessing the murder of her mother in 1994. But before *that*, there's another flashback, to 1948, in which another young child witnesses a similar incident of gun violence.

It's a harsh start to a video game published by Nintendo, and a good reminder that it's always a good idea to pay attention to the ESRB's age ratings. This one seems to earn its "T" rating quickly, and as such I'm going to be playing it without the onlooking eyes of my kiddos.

Trace Memory was rated "T" back in 2005, too, but it wasn't quite as intense as this remake. Every element, every environment and every emotion has been elevated for this edition, which goes well beyond the baseline "remake" categorization and I'd argue firmly plants itself in "reimagining" territory.

This is no simple visual upscale or even a gameplay overhaul of the old exploration scenes and puzzles we got in the DS original. In fact, from what I've seen so far, it seems like every puzzle in this new Switch version is totally new!

For example, early in the DS game, Ashley approaches a bridge that she can't cross – because it's a drawbridge and it's currently raised. She has to go to a nearby handcrank and players had to use the DS touchscreen to spin it around in circles to lower the bridge. Simple enough! But on the Switch, the equivalent bridge-crossing moment is totally different. It's no longer a drawbridge at all – just an old, broken, wooden bridge. Ashley this time has to find a long board laying nearby, pick it up, then bring it to the bridge and use it to partially repair it. (Enough for her to get safely across, any way.)

The old moment of touchscreen interaction is axed in favor of an inventory introduction – picking up the board and temporarily adding it to your collection of items serves as a quick tutorial that teaches players how they'll do that same thing with future items for future puzzles. It's a functional and well-thought-out swap.

NINTENDO DS

SWITCH

Wii

SWITCH

Beyond the puzzles getting totally revamped, Ashley's exploration is completely different than it was on the DS as well. There, the system's two screens presented two views: On the bottom screen we got a bird's-eye view of a low-poly 3D Ashley jogging around Blood Edward Island, while on the top screen a smattering of static, unmoving scenery views flashed by to show what she was currently looking at. It was very Myst-esque, which was a lot of what the game was going for! On the Switch, though, the getting-around-the-island parts have been changed to be more like the method of exploration from the second Another Code game from the Wii: With the camera placed behind her back, she now walks and runs around with a third-person 3D view. It's much more natural, and greatly expands the viewability of the environment overall. It's another excellent upgrade!

My favorite aspect of this reimagining, though, has to be how the developers have gone back and polished up all of the dialogue scenes. There's now full voice acting for all of the characters, they're fully animated and expressive (whereas before they were mostly just cardboard cutouts conversing through text boxes), and the script has been given another pass as well. Every conversation feels so much more natural! I went back to watch the first hour or so of the DS game again to do a direct comparison (thank you, archived YouTube longplays), and there are just so many moments in the dialogue scenes of the 2005 version that don't flow very well. On the Switch we're getting the same story, but it's much better told!

(I also noticed they've altered some early interactions that were somewhat problematic in the old version, like the 60-something-year-old boat captain offering 14-year-old Ashley a handful of candy as soon as her aunt strolled out of sight. Yeesh. Happy to have that cut out of the remake.)

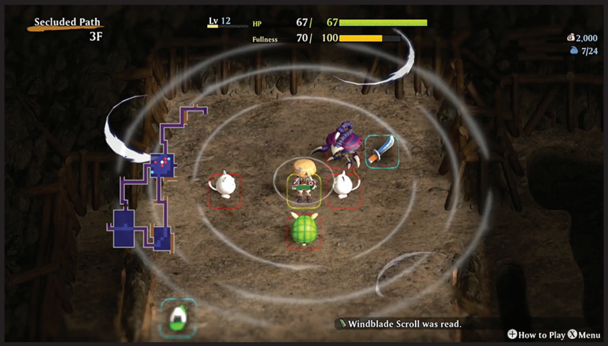
Sorry if any of what I've written here has felt spoiler-ish at all — every scene I've mentioned takes place in just the first few minutes of a fresh playthrough, so I haven't given away anything critical. And you can check it all out for yourself to form your own firsthand opinions! There's a free demo of the game now available to download in the Switch eShop.

The demo lets you play through the first hour or so of the adventure, and it also features transferrable save data — so you can play the intro now, then pick up from where you left off when the full game is made available beginning on January 19.

And I haven't even mentioned that Recollection also contains a remake of the second Another Code game, which is called A Journey into Lost Memories! It likely hasn't been overhauled quite as severely — but we'll find out for sure soon enough! **— LUCAS**

NINTENDO DS

SWITCH



SHIREN THE WANDERER: THE MYSTERY DUNGEON OF SERPENTCOIL ISLAND

Shiren's sixth quest!

SOMETIMES A WELL-TIMED port is all a series needs to get going again. In this case, that series is Shiren the Wanderer!

It's been eight years since the last mainline Shiren game, The Tower of Fortune and the Dice of Fate, initially released in the West on PlayStation Vita. That version sold well enough – but then the game received a Switch port three years ago (you'll find our review of it on Page 68). According to Spike Chunsoft in an interview with Japanese outlet Famitsu, that very Switch port and its much more impressive sales kickstarted the development of this new sequel!

And so, after eight years, this franchise will finally debut another mainline installment: Shiren the Wanderer: The Mystery Dungeon of Serpentcoil Island.

This new entry will bring Shiren and his faithful ferret Koppa to the titular Island in search of a mysterious girl who's being held captive there. The series' roguelike/RPG hybrid design will return, with turn-based combat and randomly generated dungeons, enemies and loot.

At the beginning of each new dungeon, Shiren's experience will start at Level 1 – and he'll need to gain gear and items while leveling up. But if he falls in battle, he'll lose everything!

Other features include powerful monsters called Behemoths that can track you through dungeons, and new sacred items that can provide better abilities and boosts.

It's been a long time coming for Shiren's next adventure, and according to a December Famitsu poll, fans are poised for it, with readers naming it their most-wanted Switch game. Hopefully good things come to those who wait! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RELEASE: FEBRUARY 27, 2024 RATING: E10+

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

Mechner's masterpiece, reimagined once more.

THE MORE I see of this sequel in action, the more excited I get!

The release of Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown is right around the corner, and as its January debut date has drawn nearer, Ubisoft has drawn back the curtains to reveal more and more of its features. Features like saving screenshots straight to your map!

You know how in Metroidvanias you'll come to dead ends and you won't be able to progress any further because you haven't earned the right abilities to do so yet? In The Lost Crown, when you hit those spots, you can snap a screenshot of that dead end and save it to your current position on your map. Then, maybe hours later when you have acquired whatever new ability you need to get past that stopping point, you'll be able to easily remember where it was!

Quality-of-life features like that fill me with confidence that the team behind this one understands what makes a good Metroidvania. The many different methods of movement seem like they'll make traveling through the environment a joy as well: New hero Sargon can jump off walls, flip through the air, double jump again in mid-air, slide under traps and more. You'll string together sequnces of these moves with perfect fluidity and I know it'll just be the kind of game that gets you into a great "flow" state.

Combat may interrupt your flow, of course! It seems like battles with even normal cannon fodder foes will be no walk in the park in The Lost Crown. This game's combat is apparently quite difficult, as you'll have to pay real attention to your parries and dodges and not just run into each encounter slashing wildly with your swords and expecting to win. But I do expect The Lost Crown will be a winner itself! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTPELLIER RELEASE: JANUARY 18, 2024 RATING: T

THE LEGEND OF LEGACY HD REMASTERED

An underappreciated 3DS RPG earns an HD encore.

WHEN IT FIRST released on 3DS in late 2015, The Legend of Legacy featured an experience akin to old-school RPGs with its storybook atmosphere and arduous battle system. Now, this turn-based RPG is set to receive an HD remaster, which will likely amplify that old-school feel over eight years later, but also provide a version where its world and character visuals can truly shine.

HD should especially enhance the game's Cartograph system, where the map fills in as your player character explores the world around them. There are several of those to choose from: The Legend of Legacy allows players to select from seven main characters, all of whom have all traveled to the mystical island of Avalon for different reasons.

For example, Liber is a treasure hunter hoping to strike it rich in this mysterious land, while Bianca finds herself on Avalon with amnesia and no clue as to why she's there.

The Legend of Legacy's turn-based combat system involves selecting formations, which are made up of stances: Attack, Guard and Support. You can change formations during your turns and mix up the roles your party takes on. Characters can also equip different types of weapons and utilize elemental spirits and their magic on the battlefield.

When he reviewed the original release back in NF Issue #18, Thor praised The Legend of Legacy's presentation, calling it "gorgeous" and "high-quality stuff, people." Its new high-definition visuals should only increase that appeal! This re-release will also offer a stream-lined UI (to fit everything on a single screen), as well as a guide-book feature to help new players. Still, make sure you're prepared for a good challenge! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA DEVELOPER: FURYU RELEASE: MARCH 24, 2024 RATING: E10+

APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

Report to the courtroom on January 25!

THE HD RE-RELEASE of Apollo Justice's trilogy of legal adventures is hitting the Switch on January 25, and we've got more details on what extras the final package will include alongside the fourth, fifth and sixth Ace Attorney games!

First, the DLC cases "Turnabout Reclaimed" and "Turnabout Time Traveler" will be included, along with their bonus character costumes – like Phoenix Wright's pink hand-knit sweater and school uniforms for Apollo and Athena. Turnabout Reclaimed features Phoenix defending a whale accused of murdering an aquatic theme park trainer (and you thought cross-examining a parrot was out there!), and Turnabout Time Traveler pits Phoenix and Maya against iconic prosecutor Miles Edgeworth as they investigate a murder aboard an airship. (Oh yeah, Larry Butz is back, too.)

Quality-of-life improvements include additional languages, the return of Story Mode (an accessibil-ity mode introduced in The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles that turns the games into a kinetic novel), and the ability to start playing at any point in a chapter. You'll also find an Art Gallery, which includes the short teaser animations for each game, along with various pieces of concept art – as well as a Music Player that not only features the soundtracks from all three games, but selections from the commemo-rative orchestral concerts too.

Finally, for those with a creative bent in mind, there's the Animation Studio, which lets you play with the various character models and their poses, listen to their voiced lines and put them in any background imaginable – including a green screen! If you want to produce a remake of the Phoenix Wright version of The Frantics' "Boot to the Head" video, here's your chance! **— REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RELEASE: JANUARY 25, 2024 RATING: T

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

A remake that reaffirms the enduring appeal of the original release!

"AGING WELL."

You hear people talking about that all the time in the video game world. They look back at some game that was first released 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, and then they ask the question, "Did it age well?"

What does that even mean? Well, it's a question that's almost always the lead-in to a discussion about a game's graphics. Did the game look good when it was first released? And, if so, does it still look good today? Or has the passage of time removed the rose tint from our nostalgia glasses, letting us re-evaluate our old opinion and decide, in hindsight, that the game must not have actually *ever* looked good in the first place?

I think it's oftentimes a nonsensical question to ask . . . except in the case of The Thousand-Year Door. Because there can be no debate about this one! This second Paper Mario installment, which originally launched in 2004 on the GameCube, absolutely has aged well. It looked beautiful then. It still looks beautiful now!

Look no further than the direct screenshot comparison we've printed for you on this page. Note the severe similarity in the character art! Yes, the new Switch version is running in HD, and it has better lighting, and you can see more of the scene to the left and the right of the conversing characters thanks to its snazzy new widescreen display ratio. I'm not trying to undersell the incredible new look at all. But I am trying to reignite everyone's awe for the original, because holy cow, how many other 20-year-old games could get a modern remake today and still have their character models end up looking so similar, because the developers 20 years ago did such a phenomenal job making them in the first place? It's honestly wild.

And it speaks to a growing trend we're seeing in Nintendo's remakes: a genuine respect for the existing work.

The new Super Mario RPG is such an honoring overhaul — it really does show a great deal of reverence to its source material, and doesn't dare to alter any of its old characters or environments too extremely. Metroid Prime Remastered was the same way — Retro Studios went above and beyond the call of duty to create all-new character models and textures and environmental assets for that re-release, when all of us would have been perfectly satisfied with a safer, more subdued port of the old version to the Switch. And now it's happening again: Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door could've been a simple, no-frills remaster in its encore appearance. No one would have complained in the least! We would've been thrilled to see that announcement! But instead Nintendo is pulling out all the stops again, without needing to. Because yes, the game already looked amazing 20 years ago — but what if it could now look *super-extra-bonus-amazing?!*

If this is the bold new direction for Nintendo — investing extra effort when it isn't even needed — I'm here for it!

The Switch remake of Thousand-Year Door does not yet have a release date locked in (beyond just "2024"), so we may still be waiting a while for this one to go on sale. I'm curious if they'll try to make its release be a part of a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the original in any way: It first went on sale on the GameCube in Japan on July 22, 2004; in North America its debut was on October 11 that same year; then it hit Europe and Australia that November. If Nintendo chooses to re-align with any of those times, I'd bet it'd be July. The series' most recent sequel, The Origami King, made its arrival in July 2020, after all! Seems like a good time slot for Paper Mario.

But I won't get angry if they want to bring it out sooner. Or later. Sell it whenever! I'm just happy to know that it exists, and that it still looks great, because it aged so well! **— LUCAS**

GAMECUBE

SWITCH

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYS.
RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: E

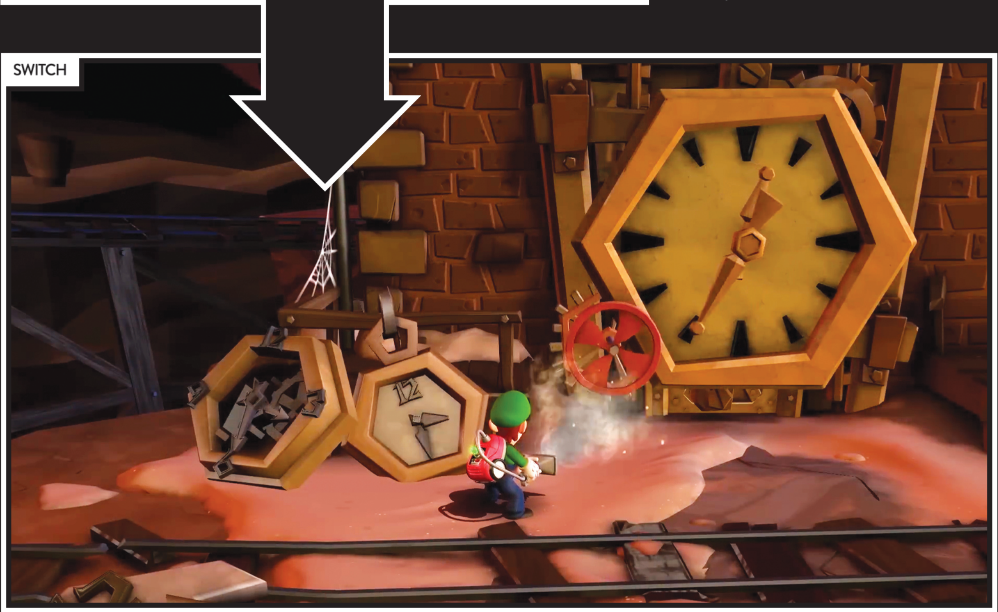
LUIGI'S MANSION 2 HD

The Dark Moon will rise again in 2024!

SWITCH

3DS

SWITCH



WHAT COMES AFTER 1, before 3, but also after both 1 and 3? If you're Luigi's Mansion, then the answer is, of course, 2!

After releasing a remake of the first game on the 3DS and the third game in the trilogy (as it stands) on the Switch, Nintendo is now filling in the gap with the 3DS game formerly known to us in North America as "Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon."

Like in the original, Luigi is teaming once again with Professor E. Gadd, the nutty scientist he met while trying to find Mario in the GameCube launch title. This time, his research into molds, fungus and spor– *er,* ghosts, specters and poltergeists, has led him to Evershade Valley, where the local Boo Buddies have been pretty amiable apparitions to Gadd's presence. That is, until something strange happens in the neighborhood – namely, King Boo returning to shatter the Dark Moon that once hung over the valley, thus turning the happy spirits malicious!

Gadd puts the call out to Luigi to help once again, and despite his protests – he's *quite* ready to believe him – the green Mario is teleported to Gadd's lab to be begrudgingly put to work. On the bright side, he gets to keep all the treasure he can find, which *has* to be better pay by the hour than that plumbing gig he and his brother have going on.

Unlike the first and third games, this time Luigi winds up investigating not one, not two, but *five* different mansions located around Evershade Valley, each with its own theme. What's more, perhaps owing to the portable nature of the 3DS release, progression works a bit differently.

Rather than having largely free run of the various locations in an almost Metroidvania-type manor – *er,* manner, each mansion is divided into five missions (except for Secret Mine's three), as well as a boss encounter and a bonus mission. This change in format, along with some aggressive difficulty spikes, has made the game somewhat divisive among players. (It remains to be seen if the HD version will massage any of these elements for newcomers.)

But who cares about that, when it also marks the debut of the lovable Polterpup? *Who's a ghoul boy?*

One thing that we *do* know, however, is that the ScareScraper is making its grand return. In this mode, you and up to three of your Luigi-lovin' buddies team up to take on the tall tower's challenges, floor by floor, with a boss waiting on every fifth floor. The original had three difficulty settings, four modes, and could be set to run for five, 10, 25 or even an infinite number of rooms! What's more, the multiplayer allowed for local and online bustin', and since that seems to be the case for the HD version, that makes us feel good.

We still have a while to find out more before the game releases later in '24 – Summer, currently, though I'm sure there are those among us (myself included) whose feelings wouldn't be hurt if the release were bumped back to, say . . . sometime in early October? Luigi's Mansion is just always so perfectly paired with the annual spooky season. LM3 actually launched on Halloween day, after all! **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & NEXT LEVEL GAMES RELEASE: SUMMER 2024 RATING: E

REMASTERS

THREE TAKES ON REMAKES

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

REMAKES

REIMAGININGS

REMASTERS

ARE YOU AS confused as I am?

The calendar's flipping into another New Year, and as 2024 dawns we find ourselves fast approaching half a century of home video game history. It's kind of a murky milestone to mark, but 50 years ago the earliest home consoles were already on the market! (And if you want to stick with just Nintendo history, the Famicom's already pushed past 40 and the NES' equivalent anniversary will happen soon too.)

What I'm getting at is that, as the video game industry grows ever older, there and more and more older video games that exist – and more and more opportunities for the publishers of today to reach back into the past and remake the games of yesterday. Remakes are appearing with increasing frequency, drawing on source material from relatively recent history all the way back to near the dawn of gaming itself!

The fact that so many games are being remade these days isn't the confusing thing – that makes sense to me. I understand the "why." What does get confusing is the "how" – as in how new developers decide to go about making remakes, and also how they decide what to call their efforts in the marketing process.

Three different terms have floated to the forefront of this discussion, whenever it is discussed: remasters, remakes and reimaginings. But what do those mean? Is there really a difference between them, or are they all fair game to use interchangeably?

I propose that there is a separation between them, beginning with "remasters." This category, I feel, is the easiest to understand: Remasters almost always concern themselves with redoing an old game's presentation. The original graphics and often the original sound are given a makeover – swapped out for a bolder, more colorful, more high-definition look and fuller, richer music. The gameplay of remasters, meanwhile, most often remains largely unchanged. The remaster treatment is for games that still play great, just like they did when they were brand-new, years ago – but they just need a little freshening up to look and sound their best on modern TVs.

WayForward's DuckTales: Remastered in 2013 was one of the first to kick off this trend – its visuals and sound are wildly upgraded, making it really look like you're playing the old Disney cartoon. But, under that fresh coat of paint, it's still the old NES DuckTales game at heart. Same level designs, same play control. (For the most part.) Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap followed suit when it swapped in gorgeous new hand-drawn art for the pixel graphics of its source material. The Switch remake of Famicom Detective Club may be the biggest upgrade in this category! It looks nothing like its old 8-bit form! Though it was localized for the first time, which means it starts bleeding into our next term . . .

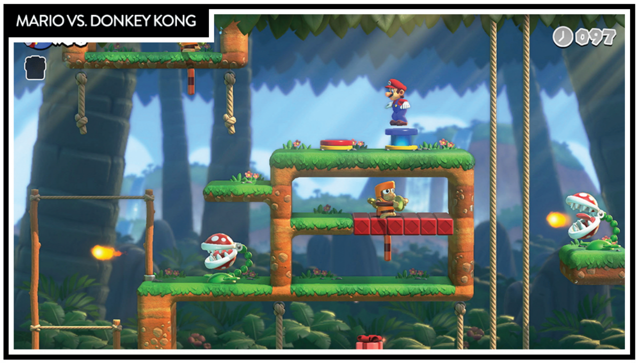
DUCKTALES: REMASTERED

WONDER BOY: THE DRAGON'S TRAP

FAMICOM DETECTIVE CLUB: THE MISSING HEIR

METROID PRIME REMASTERED

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG



REMAKES

I'M RISKING CONFUSING you all again (as well as myself), but underneath the umbrella of "remakes," the word "remake" also exists as its own sub-category of itself. (Yep. I did it. I confused myself.)

So when should a remake just be called a remake, and not a remaster? When it takes another step beyond just redoing the presentation of an old game – when its developers put in the extra effort to also overhaul or refurbish some aspect of how the game plays too.

Examples will help here! I'd argue that one of the most clearly understandable remakes of the Switch era was Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! (and its counterpart, Let's Go, Eevee!) back in 2018. This pair of titles presented a brand-new version of the Pokémon series' original RPG quest: the journey through the Kanto region to meet and catch the original 151 Pokémon. The same journey first chronicled in Pokémon Red & Blue back in the '90s, and then again in Pokémon Yellow, and then *again* in Pokémon FireRed & LeafGreen. Pokémon fans had a lot of chances to become the Champion of the Indigo League through those older versions, but in Let's Go the quest was remade in key ways: Catching Pokémon was totally changed to become a first-person ball-tossing minigame, Ride Pokémon made getting around the map more fun and players got permanent partners in the form of an especially emotionally expressive Pikachu or Eevee (depending on which version they bought). That was all in addition to the completely new presentation.

The Switch remake of The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening is just about as middle-of-the-road remakey as a remake can get. It's got the same layout for Koholint Island and the same quest from decades earlier, but its graphics are a totally different style and its play control has been upgraded to be much smoother. It also has a new Dungeon Maker feature – adding extra content that wasn't in the older version is a hallmark of remakes.

Like in Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition! You could argue that it should just be called a remaster, since most of the effort in bringing it to the Switch was in upgrading its visuals. (Its new, more detailed character models are a big selling point, particularly in cutscenes.) But the re-release also included several quality-of-life enhancements to make playing the game better, as well as a wholly new epilogue story that restored content that was cut during development of the original Wii version. That's going beyond "remaster." That's a remake there.

Maybe we could call remakes "rethinks," because that seems to be the driving force behind the developers who take on these projects. They look at old games, figure out a way to beautify them for modern audiences, but also take the time to carefully reconsider aspects of their gameplay or their total content offering and give those facets of the game a boost too!

POKÉMON: LET'S GO, PIKACHU!

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 1 + 2

LIVE A LIVE

METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

RESIDENT EVIL 2

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION

CONTRA: OPERATION GALUGA

REIMAGININGS

HERE'S WHERE THINGS really start to get wild!

Sometimes, during the process of sitting down and planning out a remake, a team of developers will decide to take a game all the way back to the drawing board. Totally re-envision what it could be; how its story could be told. They reimagine the entire thing!

One of the first and still most shocking reimaginings I've ever personally played was a game called Lufia: Curse of the Sinistrals on the Nintendo DS. I was given the review assignment for it for IGN, and going into it I only knew that it was a remake of Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals from the SNES. That game had been a 2D, turn-based RPG. I expected something similar for its new DS version . . . but found something totally different! For the remake, the new developers at Neverland and Square Enix transformed the whole thing into a 3D action RPG with real-time combat! I'd never seen anything like it.

Now, to this day, I'm still a sucker for a truly transformative reimagining of an older video game.

Because this category of remake demands the largest investment of time and effort to create, there aren't as many reimaginings in existence as there are remasters and "normal" remakes. Even fewer of those that do exist are available on Nintendo's side of the industry.

I've crossed the picket line twice in recent years to play a pair of PlayStation-exclusive reimaginings. The clunky, aged Resident Evil 2 was brilliantly overhauled to become almost an entirely new experience back in 2019. (How is that already five years ago now!?) It stunned the industry and became such a huge success for Capcom that they've since gone on to give similar reimaginings to more of the older RE installments.

Square Enix's Final Fantasy VII Remake calls itself a remake right there in its name, but it's a reimagining in reality – it totally changed the combat system to present a brand-new blend of real-time hacking and slashing with menu selection for casting magic spells and issuing other commands. But beyond the gameplay, its storyline diverged in some crazy ways from the original FFVII, and went in a new direction! It's about to get a sequel on PlayStation platforms. (Maybe we'll get it on the next Nintendo system? Better late than never!)

Nintendo has offered reimaginings too, of course. I'd shine the spotlight on Metroid: Samus Returns for its complete redo of Metroid II: Return of Samus – the team at MercurySteam took that old Game Boy game as a template, but then built nearly an entirely new quest for Samus all around it. The new take on Trace Memory in Another Code: Recollection is essentially an all-new game with how different its puzzles are. And Contra: Operation Galuga, according to director Tomm Hulett, is also being considered a reimagining . . . but I'll let you read more about that in the Interview section!

DEMAKES

REMASTERS, REMAKES & REIMAGININGS cover the Three Takes on Remakes, as promised, but before we begin to bring this discussion to a close, let's also take a moment to acknowledge the opposite of all three of those approaches. Let's talk about demakes!

Demakes are the Wario to remakes' Mario: They go in the other direction entirely! Demakes are brand-new video games that intentionally try to look as old and out-of-date as possible. They are games made to look like they were built to run on old hardware . . . or, sometimes, they actually do run on old hardware!

This brings us right back around to where we began: The ever-increasing age of the gaming industry. Multiple decades' worth of back-catalog titles present lots of choices for devs who want to reach into the past and remake something, but all of those passed-by years also mean there's an ever-growing nostalgia for the old days among aging gamers!

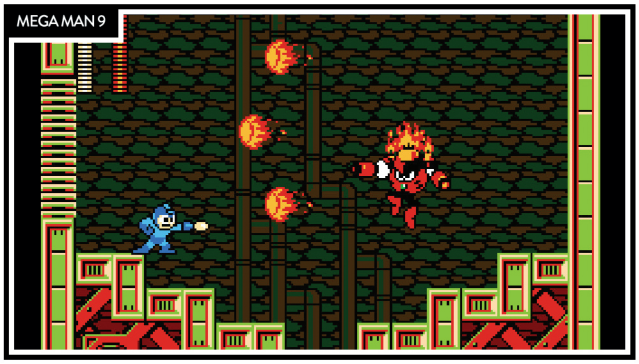
Capcom was one of the first to tap into this truth, as in 2008 they presented the brand-new Mega Man 9 . . . which was made to look and play just like one of the old NES games from the '80s and early '90s. Its reveal trailer at the time put special emphasis on this, showing how Mega Man had evolved to look more advanced in Mega Man 7 and again in Mega Man 8, setting up the expectation that we were just about to see the next, even more advanced visual revision of the character. And then it hard-swerved back to the original NES Mega Man sprite instead! Mega Man 9 kicked off a retro revival that's still going strong even now, over 15 years later – its daring de-evolution of its series was perfectly timed, and fans loved it.

Capcom tried to catch the same lightning in a bottle a second time with Dark Void Zero two years later, making it as a kind of "lost" NES game as a companion piece to their larger, wholly modern Dark Void game on the home consoles of 2010. It didn't work out so well – since no one had any nostalgia for Dark Void.

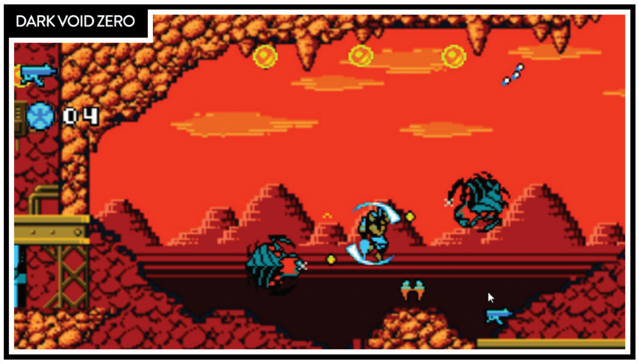
WayForward found more success doing an "old" take on a new property when they presented The Mummy Demastered, which called direct attention to its old art direction right in its title. (The game was arguably better than the movie it was based on, which was itself a remake of 1999's The Mummy starring Brendan Fraser – and *that* was a remake of The Mummy from 1932!)

For the most part, though, demakes thrive in the fan scene, as hobbyist developers refine their game-making skills by working on "old" versions of newer games for fun. The biggest success story there: Dan Fornace, who made Super Smash Land for Game Boy in 2011, has since gone on to create the commercially successful Smash clone Rivals of Aether . . . and Rivals 2 is in the works right now! Demakes can be the first step to greatness!

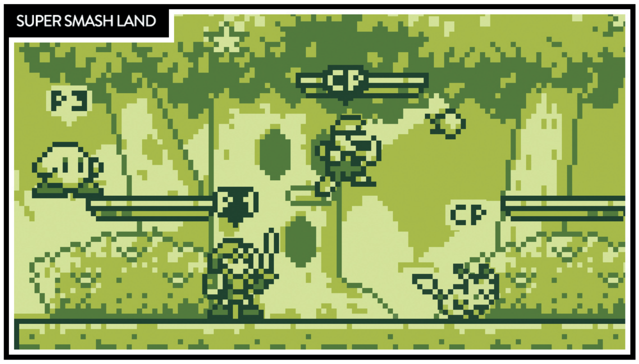
MEGA MAN 9



DARK VOID ZERO



SUPER SMASH LAND



THE MUMMY DEMASTERED

METROID PRIME 2D

REMAKES HAVE A RANGE!

HAVE WE HELPED define the differences between remasters, remakes and reimaginings for you in this feature? Or are you even more mixed up than before? If so, I wouldn't fault you. Because the truth is that it's nearly impossible to draw a perfectly defined line between the three terms!

When I brought up the idea of tackling this topic with the whole NF team, comics artist extraordinaire Matthew Taranto wanted to share his thoughts — but then he decided that it made more sense to draw them out rather than type them out in text. He whipped up the graphic you see printed below, which I think perfectly and concisely sums up this whole situation.

Remakes have a range! They have a whole spectrum of existence. One term naturally leads into the next, and each individual remake can be argued to live anywhere along this scale, depending on all kinds of different factors.

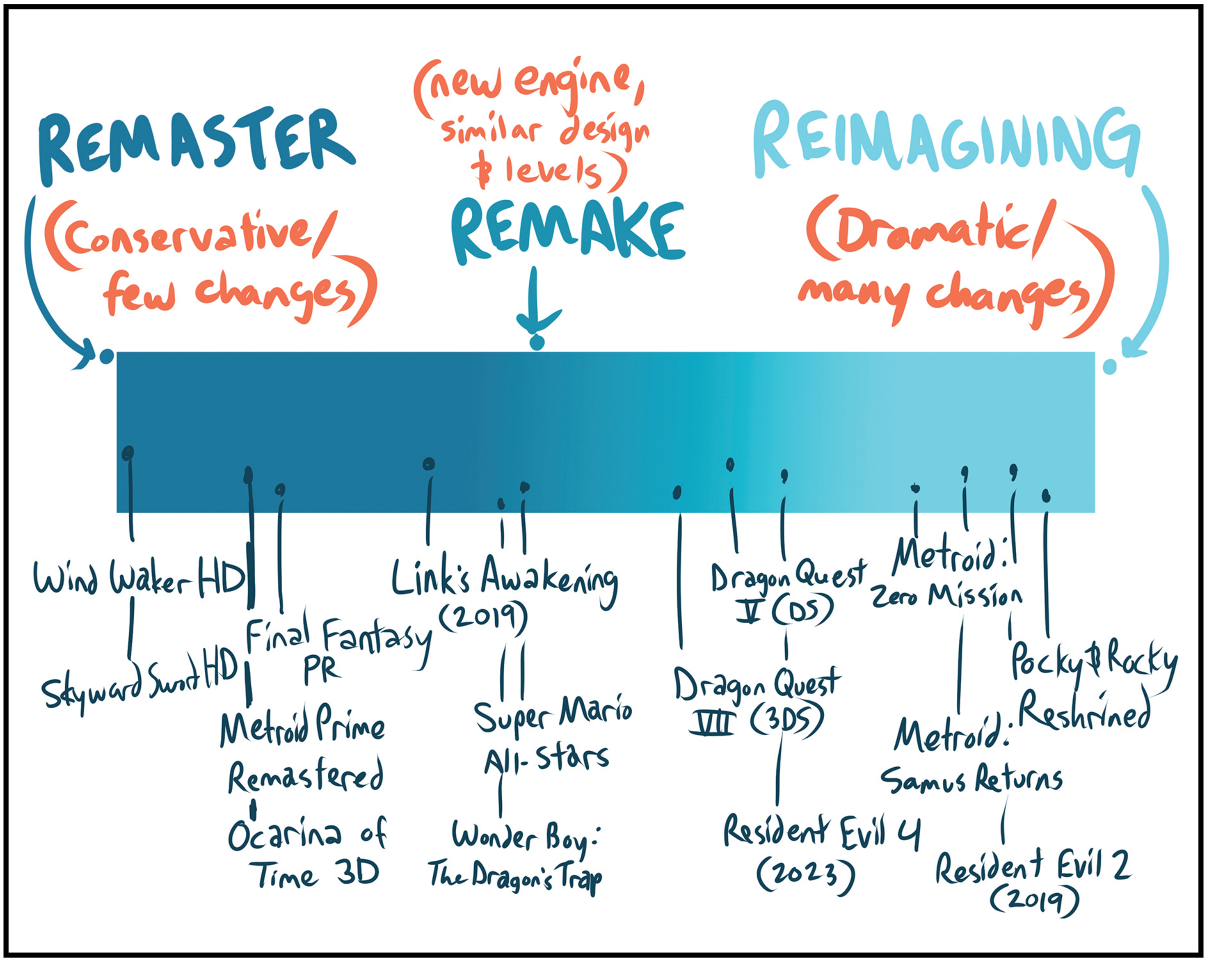
Remasters, in general, are the least altered from their original source material: They look better than before, but usually nothing too fundamental in how they play has been changed. They're the least remakey of remakes.

Right in the middle are the "normal" remakes like the Switch version of Link's Awakening, where's there a greater degree of "new" across all aspects of the game.

And then reimaginings, with the largest amount of effort invested in them, are on the right side of the range — developers that really go all-out with their remakes find their works end up landing there.

If you really wanted to take this even further, you could picture ports of old games being placed to the left of remasters, off the side of the spectrum — they're old games brought forward into the future too, but the only thing new about them is the system they're running on. On the far right, beyond reimaginings? Over there you're getting into the territory of entirely new, original games that are so extremely different that they can't be considered remakes of old titles any more at all. You could place some spiritual successor games there, as new designs that are clearly inspired by older efforts, but blaze their own trails.

So "remasters," "remakes" and "reimaginings" . . . probably no game ever fits fully into those terms. The Three Takes can always be argued to live further up or down this range of remakes!



THE NINTENDO FORCE
GAME OF THE YEAR
AWARDS 2023

It's an annual tradition! It's time once again for Gold Mario to tip his cap in recognition of the best of the best from the past 12 months of gaming. Which developers excelled above all others with their stories, their characters, their visuals and their sound? Which games brought us experiences we've never seen before, or brought *back* experiences from the past that we'd been waiting to see again? These are the NF team's official award winners for 2023!

BEST GRAPHICS
SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

From the most mind-bending, screen-filling visual effects trigged by the game's Wonder Flowers to the smallest, most subtle expressions of emotion on each character's face as they run, jump and swim through the Flower Kingdom, this latest Super Mario Bros. sequel is exquisitely entertaining eye candy!

BEST MUSIC
OCTOPATH TRAVELER II

Half a decade after the first Octopath Traveler earned this same honor for 2018, I'm pleased to report that this sonically sensational Square Enix series has defended its title. This new OT OST is OMG, and is worth enjoying on its own, even if you haven't played the game itself. (But you should do that too!)

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

BEST CHALLENGE

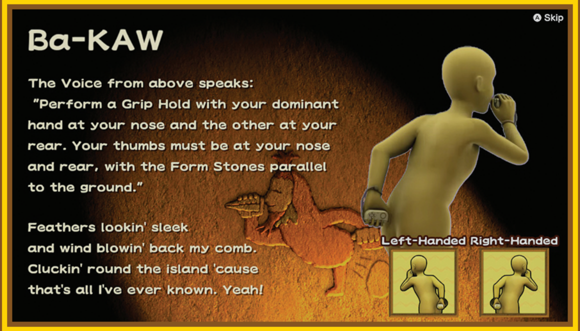
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

From easy-going, go-anywhere exploration to truly intense boss battles, Link's latest quest spans the entire spectrum of challenge. What makes its challenge the "best," though, is how creativity factors in: Everyone will come up with unique solutions to each situation!

BEST THEME & FUN

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

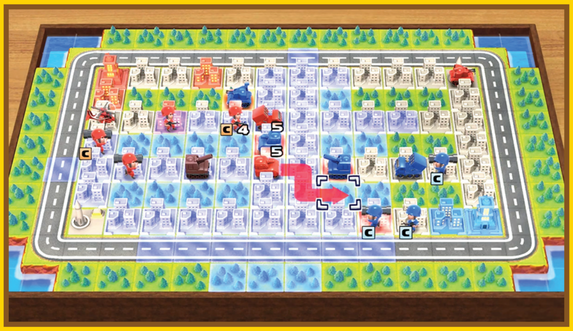
It's hard to have more fun with a video game than filling a room with family and friends and then having one person play a charmingly demeaning and embarassing game like WarioWare: Move It! – acting like a chicken with a Joy-Con held to your rear end is the stuff that kids' lasting memories are made of!



BEST MULTIPLAYER

ADVANCE WARS 1 + 2: RE-BOOT CAMP

A bit of a different selection for this category this year, since we most often honor simultaneous co-op modes. There are other award-worthy ways to play with more than one person, though, like the evolved, chess-esque head-to-head tactical battles of Advance Wars!



BEST PLAY CONTROL

PIKMIN 4

It's just so snappy! Pikmin 4 totally shifted the feel of its series by moving its camera down closer to the ground, and by putting a new emphasis on fast tosses of Pikmin assisted by an excellent auto-aiming system (as opposed to the old, inaccurate and fiddly cursors or motion control mechanics from past sequels). It rocks!

BIGGEST SURPRISE
TWO MARIO RPGS REBORN!

We're splitting this honor in two to give an equal amount of recognition to both halves of the one-two punch: The remake of Super Mario RPG was revealed out of nowhere in June, and having not blown fans' minds quite enough, the long-hoped-for remake of Thousand-Year Door also got unveiled in September!

BEST REVIVAL
THE MAKING OF KARATEKA

Reaching back in time by nearly 40 years, this bold and groundbreaking interactive museum exhibit not only revived the legendary Karateka, but also set a new standard for important future work in video game preservation. Here's hoping the Gold Master Series ends up having new installments for years to come!

BEST NEW CHARACTER
OATCHI

Pikmin 4 extends its series' tradition of introducing new Pikmin types, continuing the evolution of our understanding of Planet PNF-404's alien ecosystem – but the new Ice Pikmin and Glow Pikmin weren't the stand-out stars of this sequel! That honor has gone to the dog: the happy, helpful, playful and playable puppy pal, Oatchi! This incredibly capable canine has nearly all the same capabilities as a Captain character, in that he can take charge of Pikmin squads, lead them into battle and whistle for them when it's time to retreat – but that's just the beginning of his set of skills! Oatchi can also carry an entire army of 100 Pikmin troops on his back, ferry them safely across water, charge into battle against enemies both together with an assaulting Pikmin squad or alone, pick up and drag Treasures back to home base . . . honestly, there isn't much that Oatchi *can't* do in this game! He's an invaluable ally, and on top of it all, he's just so stinkin' cute!

BEST REMASTER
METROID PRIME REMASTERED

After developing and launching the first three mainline Metroid Prime games, the portable spin-off Metroid Prime Hunters, the gloriously reimagined Donkey Kong County Returns *and* even helping out with Mario Kart 7 all within the span of a single decade, Retro Studios went almost entirely silent for the 10-year span that came immediately afterward. Only Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze had emerged from the studio since the dawn of the Wii U era, over 11 years ago! What exactly had they been up to down there in Texas, anyway? Well, we finally got one grand answer to that question in February 2023, when Retro proudly presented this *gorgeous* remastered version of their original Samus Aran epic. Nintendo has that same team working on the new Metroid Prime 4, and it seems as part of the development of that brand-new sequel, they went back to the brand's beginnings and gave it a total visual refresh. And it's breathtaking! Not totally perfect – there are some minor quibbles to be made – but it's genuinely such a jaw-dropping visual spectacle that nearly everyone's doubts about Prime 4 seem to have been dispelled. So take your time, Retro!

BEST INNOVATION
BUILDING WITH ULTRAHAND

Endless possibilities! Tears of the Kingdom expands on the grand freedom of exploration from Breath of the Wild, but also encourages pure creativity for how you get around: The Ultrahand gameplay mechanic lets you grab parts and pieces and assemble all kinds of wild vehicles, traps and other contraptions. It's great!

BEST DLC
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3: FUTURE REDEEMED

Pulling together several different story threads first seen in previously separate Xenoblade sequels and weaving them all together into one narratively satisfying whole, this DLC superbly served as the final chapter for an entire era of the series' history.

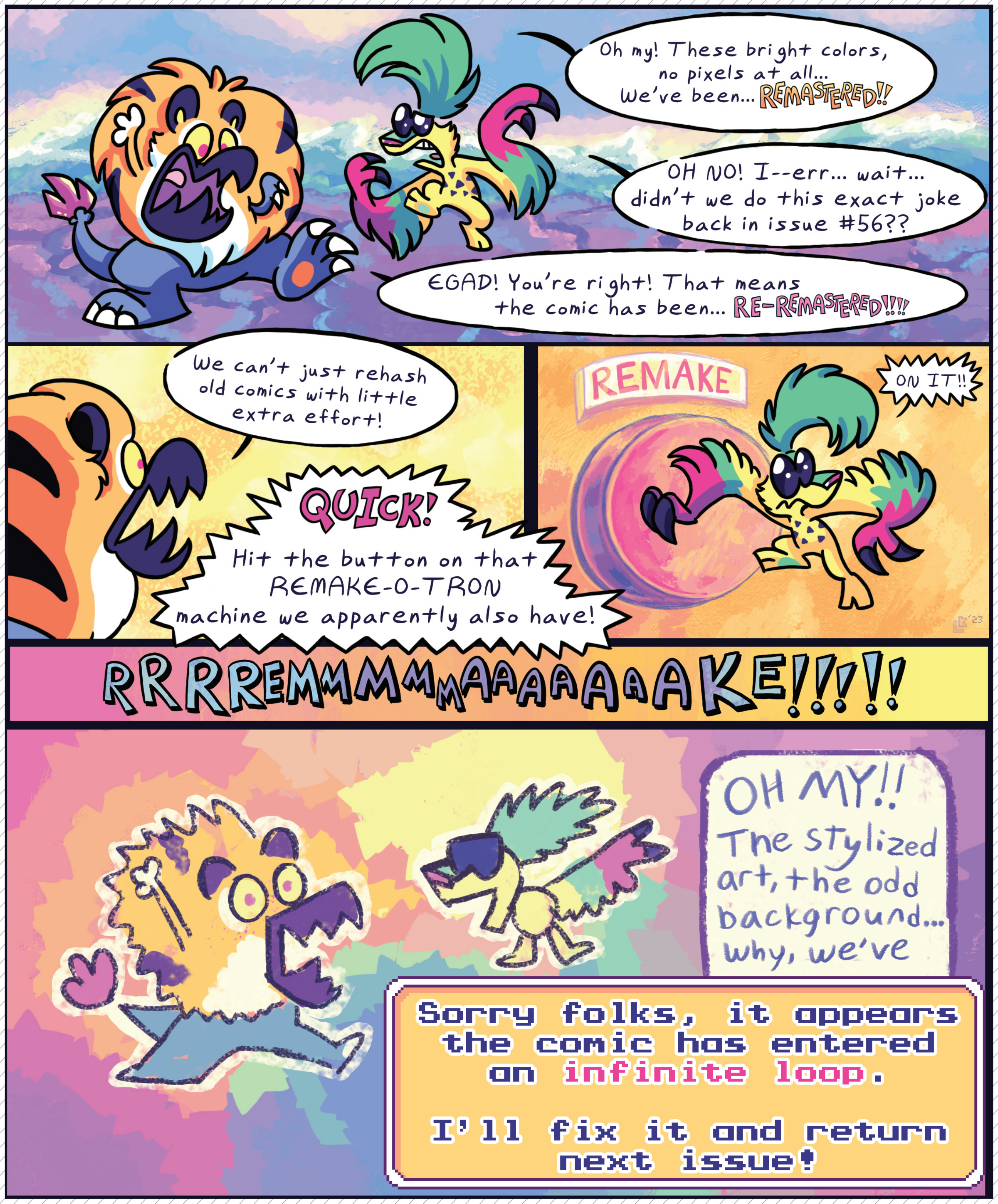
THE 2023 NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

2023 was truly a remarkable year for Nintendo gaming, as the Switch was firing on all cylinders with major first-party launches like Pikmin 4, Metroid Prime Remastered, Super Mario Bros. Wonder and more – and while any of those could be argued to be worthy of the year's highest honor, we ultimately had to give the crown to the latest Legend of Zelda quest! From its thrilling opening moments to its hours upon hours of discovery and creation to, finally, its insanely epic final confrontation, Tears of the Kingdom is a memorable masterpiece that we'll be recalling fondly for decades to come. (And it will probably take us that long to track down all of its squirrelled-away secrets and hidden Koroks!) Breath of the Wild gave us a grand, open world to explore in a reimagined kingdom of Hyrule, and Tears of the Kingdom let us revisit that same world – but on an even grander scale, thanks to the addition of the new Sky and Depths areas. It held such a vast adventure that it's hard to imagine how Nintendo could possibly top it in the future! For now, though, let's just appreciate Zelda as it is at this moment.

RESTO

starring
A final boss
&
An annoying 90s mascot
by LLK



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA®

Link is heading to the big screen next, in live action! Let's discuss!

LUCAS: We've reconvened the NF Film Club not to discuss another movie that's just opened in theaters, but rather one that won't see the silver screen for several more years! Everyone's got first takes to share about the just-announced live-action Zelda film, so we figured we'd preserve these for posterity:

BRETT: There are very few movies where there is a silent protagonist, so my main worry at this point isn't necessarily casting, but whether or not Link will speak beyond his normal grunts and reactions. Would a speaking Link make or break the movie for you? For me, I'm not sure, but there is a plethora of time spent alone in the games, and without a talking entity of some sort, watching could become like watching someone play a Zelda game. People do it, but it's not the sort of experience people line up at theaters for.

I also hate to get my heart set on a cast and then get disappointed, so I think I'll just be surprised there. I'm wondering what story they will tell? Will they go with time-traveling high fantasy and use perhaps the most well-known narrative – Ocarina of Time – or will it be a mashup of many stories so far? I think it could potentially be cooler to tell its own story woven with what has come before, and keep the same reoccurring elements that we see in each game.

I still think it's April Fools' Day, especially the part about using Sony to produce. Why did they stray from Universal? Who approached whom? So many questions.

DAVID: Yeah, my first and foremost thought is that they should do something original, but lean into the tropes that carry over from one Zelda game to the next.

It's like the A Link to the Past comic that ran in Nintendo Power way back when – I thought it was better served as its own story that still used Zelda elements, but not a very good adaptation of A Link to the Past. Do that, but minus trying to tie it to a specific game.

As far as Sony goes, I think Ken Kutaragi must be rolling in his grave. I mean, last I heard, he was still alive, but I'm pretty sure this news will probably kill him.

MATTHEW T.: Zelda is my favorite series of all, but I'm mostly curious about this movie rather than particularly excited. It's a bit cliché to say at this point, but I would've really liked to see Studio Ghibli try their hand at this. I think they could've pulled off the quiet quirkiness of the series and the distinct medieval + Japanese aesthetic. (Then again, their last film based off an existing fantasy story was a big whiff.)

Live action could still work, but I can't help but be concerned about all the things that could potentially go wrong. What if it's a boring epic that takes itself far too seriously? Or, conversely, a cynically detached quip-fest that doesn't take itself seriously enough?

I'm not as concerned about Link speaking, since honestly we all pretty much have a good idea of what his personality is like and his portrayals in things like the manga are fine. But he and Zelda should be played by actors younger than most are suggesting; if you ask me, if an actor is too old to play Harry Potter, he's too old to play Link.

DAVID: The joke I've seen around casting is that they'll get one of the Chrises to play Link.

But that also leads to another consideration: What kinds of things might they be able to get away with in a movie that simply wouldn't work in a game?

In a game, there's usually something going on necessitating Link being treated like a beginner, so new players can be brought up to speed. In a movie, there is no need for that. Could a more experienced Link work in a movie in a way that it wouldn't in the games?

Just spitballing, but maybe one such idea could explore the connecting path that led The Hero of Time to become The Hero's Shade? In that case, an older Link than we're used to might not only work, but be necessary.

KRIS: I have to say, this entire thing fills me with unease. The director has quite a spotty record, and last I checked, the rumored writer was a bit of a mixed bag too in terms of quality. And Matthew is 100% correct: The tone is something they're going to have to be very careful with. Turning it into Game of Thrones or even Lord of the Rings wouldn't be Zelda, and neither would going the same route of the most recent Dungeons & Dragons movie. Zelda is goofy, but also impactful when it wants to be. Nailing that is going to be pretty important.

I can't shake the feeling the bar for quality is going to be a *lot* higher here than with the Mario movie. People love Mario . . . but people take Zelda fandom a lot more seriously, and especially if we're trying to translate such a diverse series into live action, things could go horribly awry.

With such a huge pool of stories to pull from, it's hard to tell which direction they'd want to go. Breath of the Wild is by far the most popular Zelda has ever been, so maybe they'll take a more fantasy sci-fi approach and set it in a world similar to that? Then again, Ocarina is probably the most beloved incarnation, so maybe they'll try to interpret that and set up for a Majora's Mask sequel? Or maybe they'll take an amalgamation approach, pulling from a number of sources? I don't know!

Zelda's going to be a hard thing to get right, and I would have been much happier to see Nintendo take a lower-risk approach for their follow-up to the Mario movie to really get their feet under them before tackling something as big as Zelda. A Star Fox movie basically writes itself, you know?

I guess we'll just have to wait and see. The Mario movie was far from perfect, but it came out a heck of a lot better than I expected it to, so I'm going to remain cautiously optimistic (HUGE emphasis on "cautiously").

JONATHAN: No need to be cautious, Kris! I think we'll all be happier if we throw our hopes out the window and brace ourselves for a glorious, lovable, awe-inspiring trainwreck. That's what we got from the original Bob Hoskins Mario movie, and judging from Avi Arad's past work at Sony (including everything from the critically acclaimed Spider-Verse films to hardcore schlock like Ghost Rider and Morbius), there's a good chance this new Zelda film will follow suit.

And should we even try to escape from the fact that a live-action Zelda movie is probably a bad idea? The one throughline for the franchise is completely gameplay-based, making it inherently incompatible with linear storytelling. It doesn't matter if Link is a toon, a toy, a boy or a blue-shirted hunk; in the games, he's always set to explore mysterious, inviting, yet treacherous spaces. And he's always (eventually) rewarded for experimenting with all the tools at his disposal.

Or should I say, "the player" is always rewarded, because the whole concept of Link is that he's a non-entity! He only exists to be a "link" between the player on one side of the screen and the game world on the other. Watching some actor pretend to be Link, especially if he talks in his own voice, would ruin any chance of capturing that feeling. Remember the

guy in the black turtleneck from the Zelda 1 commercials who fantasized about being Link for our amusement, swinging his arms and yelling "PEAHATS!" at the top of his lungs? Not exactly immersive cinema!

So I'm with Brett when he says that Link should be silent in this movie, but I also know that's never going to happen. Only one face in film history has dared to take a chance on shutting up for the entirety of a video game-inspired film, and that would be Nicolas Cage. A few years back, he starred in an R-rated, Five Nights at Freddy's-a-like horror movie called Willy's Wonderland, where his constant quiet does a lot to make his character feel real. By leaving space for us to imagine what he's thinking, we can inhabit the body of the man ourselves as he engages in a bevy of bizarre boss fights against animatronic animals. And it actually feels believable, in a tongue-and-cheek sort of way.

It's a safe bet that Miyamoto won't be looking to copy a low-budget gorefest for his Zelda film, and we already know that it won't look like a Studio Ghibli movie either. But like Matt said, that would have been the best way to stay true to the heart of the series. The amount of Ghibli references in the last two decades of Zelda games is hard to count! Tears of the Kingdom alone lifted set pieces directly from Spirited Away, My Neighbor Totoro, Princess Mononoke, Nausicaä and Castle in the Sky. So making a Zelda movie that looks like the animated masterpieces that inspired the source material would've been the obvious and best visual choice, albeit in a sort of creatively self-cannibalistic way.

But Miyamoto will want this movie to be anything but obvious. If he's going for live action, he's going to go hard with the kind of stuff you can only do in that medium. And as the Barbie movie proved, the best way to get butts in theater seats these days is to start with a familiar premise, then go completely bananas with it.

One option would be to bring black turtleneck guy back as Link, clashing against silent Nicolas Cage's Ganondorf alongside Fran Drescher as Zelda, while Willem Dafoe's Tingle floats hauntingly in the background. That would certainly make headlines, but now that I've predicted it, I know it won't happen. Mr. Miyamoto is sure to read this magazine and axe those inspired casting ideas immediately.

Sorry for jinxing what would have been a legendary film, gamers! But now that I've set the bar that low, whatever we actually get from this movie will look golden in comparison.

DAVID: Every time something is done with Zelda in another medium, they have Link speak, so I doubt this will be any different. Cartoons, comic books, manga adaptations of the games . . . if anything, the games are kind of the outlier here.

Link's been speaking for years, it's just that in most instances, we haven't been able to actually *hear* him.

JONATHAN: Well *excuuuuuuuse me* David, but Link's appearances in other media aren't exactly canon. At best, they sit in a spot similar to where the Paper Mario series sits next to "mainline" Mario games: They're supplements to the core, made for folks who love the Zelda concept so much that they will take any chance they can to squeeze a little more into their lives. That doesn't mean they aren't great, but just like the stories in the Smash Bros. games, they are essentially alt-universe exhibition matches, and not part of the real deal.

But again, I agree 100% that Link will speak in this movie, and after getting my personal hopes and fears of what a Zelda movie could be out in my last blurb, a concept for what a live-action Zelda film should be just dawned on me. What if they embraced the "Link" concept for a Matrix/Jumanji/Neverending Story-style narrative where a kid from the real world enters the alternate universe of Hyrule through inhabiting the body of Link? That would line up with the kind of origin story we got in the Mario movies, where we see how Brooklyn's beloved plumbing brothers ended up in the Mushroom Kingdom, while still staying true to the original idea that Link is a "link" between the real and the imaginary.

Even better, what if the film switched from live action to Ghibli-style animation every time the leads leapt from the real world to Hyrule? That would definitely be something we've never gotten from a Zelda story before. Sadly, it has been done by other game adaptations like Tron and Dragon Quest (and also some arguably unsuccessful '90s films like Cool World and The Pagemaster), so it's not the newest idea.

But in the end, it will all be down to execution, and what the audience wants. And again, when it comes to critically and commercially successful modern movies, they don't get much bigger than Barbie, which worked on both a superficial level and as a meta examination of the fans' relationship with the brand. So I'd love to see the Zelda movie try something similar — though I hope they wouldn't have it start in Hyrule and have Link travel to planet Earth from there. I was one of those poor souls who saw the Dolph Lundgren Masters of the Universe movie in theaters when it first released, and even as a child, I was able to tell it smelled.

MATTHEW T.: I'd say Link started off as a kind of empty vessel, but he's sort of morphed into his own character after the jump to 3D, when he began expressing emotions and reactions to in-game events. Personally, I see Link's muteness as more of a Japanese "silent protagonist" thing (frequently seen in RPGs like Dragon Quest and Mother) rather than a fundamental attribute of the character. Heck, even Mario himself has had this treatment in his own RPGs, but he chatted it up on the big screen!

What are y'all hoping to see in terms of the storytelling? Ocarina of Time seems like the go-to baseline story, and it makes sense that they'd keep it pretty traditional. The N64 classic's large cast and dynamic plot (for Nintendo at least) make it the obvious pick, and the child/adult split could give it a way to stand out from other fantasy fare. But I wouldn't mind seeing elements of the other games sprinkled in there as well — perhaps Adult Link would have to make use of some survival skills in the wild when navigating his way around a post-Ganondorf Hyrule.

Either way, hopefully they get the same music composer as the Mario movie. A truly excellent soundtrack can go a long way toward pulling me in.

REBECCA: One thing in terms of storytelling is that I always enjoyed the games where Link starts out as a (fairly) ordinary kid thrust into an extraordinary situation. We've got the Link from A Link to the Past, which also served as the establishing points for Zelda and her powers, the seven sages, Ganondorf and the nature of the Triforce. There's also Twilight Princess Link, who's a farm boy that's a little older and has a little more experience in life. Then there's the child/adult Link of Ocarina of Time (Akira Himekawa's manga retelling manages to make the time travel aspect more realistic and less game mechanic-y). Because many of the other games depart from this formula, I don't think a retelling of Breath of the Wild or anything like that would really work. The producers aren't just trying to put butts into seats here; they're also hoping that people are going to go out and play some of the Zelda games after they're finished watching.

Also, one of the first things I thought when I heard the announcement was that Robin Williams would've been over the moon about this. Imagine if he were still around, and the producers cast him in a brief cameo role. How cool would that have been?

BRETT: I'd like to think that Zelda Williams would be invited for some role in the film, however small, just to honor that history.

World-building here is key, so wherever Link hails from needs to make sense in a larger context, especially if they want to make more than one of these movies. Hopefully the filmmakers give Hyrule time to breathe, and let the audience see the various races. I'd love to see Zoras, Gorons, Ritos and Gerudos on the big screen! Link normally doesn't spend a lot of time with these races, but I suppose they could make the Champion group travel across Hyrule together.

I also hope that the dungeons aren't just some montage sequence. Link has to collect a lot in the games like items, weapons, armor, medals and more. Most of the actual game elements in the Mario movie were glossed over or run through quickly, so will this just be thrown together? Will Link find a stockpile? Conversely, I'm not sure I want to sit through Link traversing a whole dungeon in real time either.

I *also* hope they don't shoehorn in a new-for-the-movie chatterbox companion character. I suppose a Navi or Fi could work, provided they weren't as annoying as they were in the games. If they let a companion take the speaking role, a silent Link could work, but it almost always rubs me the wrong way.

DAVID: Jonathan, every word of what you just said . . . applies here. Until we're told, "Oh yeah, this is also canon," at least. I'll also point out that Link spoke all the way back in Zelda II. Sure, it was just one line, but still!

And Matthew raises a good point, that Link may have started as the "link" between our worlds, but has since evolved into his . . . well, *their* own characters. Because yeah, Link isn't really a singular character, but different characters who share similarities, and most recently, being silent has just been a trait of his. But I'd liken him to Aang and Korra both being reincarnations (two of many) of the Avatar in that series.

AN APRIL FOOLS' DAY SURPRISE

IGN'S LIVE-ACTION LEGEND OF ZELDA TRAILER

Every year, on April 1, the Internet becomes even more vile and filled with misinformation than usual! Gags, jokes and fakeouts galore flood social media as both individual pranksters and big corporations try their best to trick unsuspecting cybersurfers into believing something is real that really isn't. Within the greater video game industry, one of the most enduringly infamous examples of this trend happened on April 1, 2008, when IGN uploaded what looked like it could be a real trailer for an upcoming live-action Legend of Zelda movie! It's still watchable on YouTube to this day (it's pulled in over 6,100,000 views across 15+ years at this point), so I encourage you all to search for it and give it a watch! It's cheesy to look back on now, sure, but a lot of genuine effort was put into the production. (I actually got to meet with the team that put it together back in my IGN days, and they were honestly passionate about the project and all massive Zelda fans.) Their take on live-action Zelda as a movie was an adaptation of Ocarina of Time, as several people are guessing the real live-action Zelda film may still end up being, now a decade and a half later — Link's origin was changed, though, so that he wasn't a little kid living among the Kokiri forest children to begin with, but rather a teenaged farm boy. Zelda was aged up as well, making both characters more instantly in line with the "Adult" part of the Ocarina of Time timeline. Ganondorf, meanwhile . . . well, like I said, the team that made this trailer did put in genuine effort. (That doesn't mean they got everything right, though.)

Speaking of which . . . wow, could you imagine if this was how we finally wound up getting a female Link? Probably not right out of the gate, but maybe in a sequel?

And speaking of sequels (yeah, I'm putting the cart before the horse here, but I think it's a good idea to be forward-looking with this stuff, to a degree), can you imagine if at some point we wound up with some sort of Avengers: Endgame battle scenario with all the different Links and Zeldas fighting all the different Ganons/Ganondorfs together?

Now *there's* a scenario where you wouldn't need much talking from the ones not known for it. And it wouldn't really be doable in a game, either — not in a way you could appreciate the same way, at least — unless it was a cutscene, which is basically just a movie scene, anyway.

JONATHAN: I would love to see the Zelda-verses collide, David, especially if Linkle made a comeback. But how could they do all those different Links in live action? Would they just slap some googly eyes on the kid from Young Sheldon and call him Toon Link? Would Toy Link be a muppet? Trust me, I'm all for it if that's what Miyamoto and the gang want to try, but multimedia miracles like Everything Everywhere All at Once are pretty hard to pull off, even if the concept is perfect for a split timeline franchise like Zelda.

And the thing is, while I totally hear you and Matthew when you say that Link has become a lot of different characters in a lot of different mediums, the fact is that some mediums are more dominant than others. And the only medium more powerful than games is movies, so what happens in this movie could influence the games forever. Case in point, Nintendo recently changed the box art for Princess Peach: Showtime! so her face looks more like it did in the film. And we can bet that, now that the Mario movie has become bigger than just about any singular Super Mario game since the original, many future Mario games may lean more into the Illumination style.

And according to my notes, this is also the first Zelda project that Miyamoto has helped design since Ocarina of Time. That in itself is arguably enough to make it canon.

DAVID: Now you have me imagining future games with a more realistic look, since this is live action. And I'm not talking Twilight Princess, but like Skyrim or Baldur's Gate or something.

As for Miyamoto working on something making it canon, does that mean the Mario movie is canon to the games? (Please say yes, I think I want that.)

BRETT: It hasn't been said whether Eiji Aonuma has also been drafted to do some work with the movie, but I'd hope that he has input.

Honestly I'm more concerned about the hit-or-miss track record of the rest of the folks mentioned.

While Avi Arad did the amazing original Spider-Man along with the recent live-action and Spider-Verse animated films, he also had flops with Morbius, the Fantastic Four movies, the Ghost Rider movies and the original X-Men movie sequels. The one that is most analogous to the Zelda movie would be Uncharted, in which Arad and his team took the most exciting moments from the first three games and tried to mash them together for general audiences. While it wasn't a failure, it wasn't a smash hit either, and many fans felt it fell short of the source material.

The director, Wes Ball, has few movies under his belt, but is most known for the Maze Runner series (which appears to have gotten progressively worse according to reviews).

The writer, Derek Connolly, is the most concerning. He wrote scripts for the Jurassic World movies, and if you've ever sat through those, you know they have some of the most outlandish plots imaginable and some of the stupidest ways to get into danger. And the dialogue was too obvious and trite! He also wrote the nearly universally panned Monster Trucks, and co-wrote the ninth Star Wars movie where Palpatine inexplicably comes back. *Yeah.* His most analogous movie would be Detective Pikachu, which I found to be fun, but that had some elements that were simply very odd to find in a movie aimed at kids, like everything to do with the villain.

While collectively it may be a good team to have for a beloved franchise attempting a new medium, I'm not sure they can turn out a movie that won't leave me shaking my head. Time will tell, but I'm not loosening my grip on my Ocarina of Time cartridge.

KRIS: Your point about Uncharted is absolutely my biggest concern. This team just doesn't sound like they're up to doing this right, especially since Uncharted is already very movie-like and Zelda is very not. However, I thought the same thing about Illumination being entrusted with Mario, and I was mostly proven wrong!

I think it all comes down to the Nintendo factor. The Super Mario Bros. Movie wasn't a great movie, but it was a decent movie that was made really well. And it's my understanding that's all due to Nintendo approaching the movie the way they approach their games: working until it's right, not just working 'til it's done. If that level of care is put into a Zelda movie, it could be great — but there are just so many pitfalls they have to avoid, like trying to cover too much source material, nailing the tone, etc. It's difficult to be all that hopeful that they'll get it right. This is going to be incredibly difficult to get right, and there's pretty much a 0% chance they'll be able to please everybody.

The thing about Link is, I've never really thought of him as a silent protagonist. I know in Tears of the Kingdom Zelda said he doesn't talk much, but in most cases it's always appeared to me that Link talks plenty, just not to us. Link talks to people in Zelda games and they respond to him like he just told them something or asked them a question. I never took that as Link being mute, just that the game was written around the player not needing to hear Link's specific thoughts.

Regardless of how vocal he is, I do think Link's going to need someone to talk to. A mostly silent Metroid movie would work, but I don't think that would fly for Zelda.

JONATHAN: It's so funny you should say that, Kris, because Samus Aran actually talks way more than Link. The fact that you still see Link as a social, communicative character compared to her "speaks" volumes on how well Nintendo has done with subtly integrating the silent protagonist storytelling technique into his series of games, despite the steady increase of NPC interactions it's seen over the years. They've worked so hard to keep Link from saying a single word so far that, while I still think Nintendo

AS SEEN ON THE SMALL SCREEN

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA ANIMATED SERIES

The upcoming live-action film will mark the debut of The Legend of Zelda on the big screen, but it already got an adaptation on the small one three decades ago! The Legend of Zelda animated series ran from September 8, 1989, until December 1 of that same year – it had only a single season's worth of shows, totaling just 13 episodes. All of them aired on Fridays, piggybacking on The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!, while Mario's own animated adventures aired Monday through Thursday. (Over 30 years later, the Zelda series is still Nintendo's second act, after Mario went first!) The Zelda cartoon clashed with the games' silent protagonist portrayal of Hyrule's hero by instead giving us a version of Link who never shut up – he always had a sarcastic comment at the ready for every situation, with his recurring catchphrase being "Well, excuuuuse me, princess!" He had plenty of chances to say that, because Zelda was almost always with Link on his journeys in this show – rather than being a damsel in distress in need of rescue somewhere, this Zelda was a fully present protagonist in her own right, frequently proving herself to be just as skilled in combat as her "protector" Link. The new movie may not end up having much in common with this old cartoon, but I could see the filmmakers deciding to pursue a similar on-screen dynamic between Link and Zelda: Rather than have them separated, why not let them go on a quest together? Peach led Mario on his journey in their movie, after all. Let's see Link and Zelda similarly fighting the forces of evil side by side, in live action!

and Sony won't take this risk, I still could see how they may want to maintain his silence in the movie.

How would you all feel if Link used ASL in the movie instead of speaking aloud? After seeing leads in shows like Only Murders in the Building and The Walking Dead communicate only in sign, I have some optimism that mainstream audiences may be ready for that.

KRIS: Yeah, between Fusion and Other M, I think Samus talks more than all the NPCs in the Zelda universe combined! But with the exception of Other M, Samus does very little actual conversing. In Dread she briefly speaks to Quiet Robe, and she shares some light interactions with some Galactic Federation folks and the Luminoth in the Prime games, but everything else she says in Super Metroid, Fusion and the rest is exposition spoken to the player, which is a very different situation than Link.

But that's a whole other conversation that I'd love to have someday. As for Link using ASL, that would be super interesting. I can't imagine anyone involved in this project taking that kind of risk, but who knows?

JONATHAN: Speaking of risk, I wonder if Nintendo is at all worried about this partnership with Sony. Apparently both companies felt pretty betrayed when the original iteration of the Nintendo PlayStation, which was planned to be a CD-ROM drive for the SNES, didn't work out.

And what if this new team-up between the two titans leads to Zelda: The Movie: The Game, exclusive to the PS6?!

OK, that's enough out of me! Envisioning all these possibilities, the longshots and the likelihoods all swirling together in my brain, is starting to make me dizzy. I need to sit down and drink some warm milk.

DAVID: My impression was that Sony Pictures and Sony PlayStation are like two different companies under the same banner. And I might be misremembering, but I don't think they have any special fondness for one another. There might even be some contempt/jealousy there – hasn't PlayStation outperformed every other division at Sony for some time now?

If anything, I'd see this move from Nintendo as a way to stick it to the PlayStation guys . . . though, realistically, that would probably simply be a perk of just doing business.

REBECCA: You all mind if I switch the subject to an important topic: CASTING?

Who would you want to see as Link, Zelda and Ganondorf?

Personally I haven't really seen a whole lot of mainstream action and superhero movies in the past few years, so I'm not as well-versed in the latest actors and actresses to make any casting decisions about Link and Zelda. But what would you all think if we got Dave Bautista to play Ganondorf?

KRIS: Link and Zelda I honestly have no real idea on, especially if they skew younger, but I'd love to see some relative unknowns for those roles. But there's pretty much a 0% chance of that happening. I almost want to say Emma Watson as Zelda, but especially if they're going to go with the whole Zelda/Sheik angle, they probably want someone a bit more "action" inclined?

I think Bautista is great, but he doesn't strike me as having the right energy for Ganondorf. He's one of the more clearly defined actual characters in Zelda lore, and at least to my mind, his actor needs to be able to portray someone who has his stuff together on the surface, but is completely unhinged just underneath. Any time I've seen Bautista play unhinged, it hasn't been "scary" unhinged, or at least not "manic scary" unhinged, if that makes sense. My personal pick right now would be Amar Chadha-Patel. He seems to have the right physicality for the role, and he strikes me as the kind of guy who can pull off both his personality and imposing nature.

BRETT: I've heard Tom Holland for Link, Emma Watson for Zelda and Idris Elba for Ganondorf, and there have been a lot of mixed feelings about that. We might see some people the director is familiar with, like cast members from the Maze Runner series, who are all younger. It's hard for me to get feelings about anything I haven't seen yet. I think unknowns would be fun, too. Luckily it's not up to me because whoever picks – and gets picked – has to face the scrutiny of the Internet. I tend to simply ignore all that vitriol and reserve my thoughts until I actually see something. A lot of people were wrong about Chris Pratt! Speculation can be fun to a point, but it can definitely cross lines, and I've seen some of that online already.

JONATHAN: As much as I'd love to see some PoC representation in the Zelda movie, I'm not sure if having the one Black lead in the film (assuming he's the only one) play a one-dimensionally evil devil man from an "exotic land" is all that great for diversity and inclusion. I'd much rather see Idris Elba play someone like the King of Hyrule. His smoldering tones would be great for the King of Red Lions as well.

MATTHEW T.: Count me in for youthful newcomers to play Link and Zelda. No reason why this movie can't break in a couple new stars.

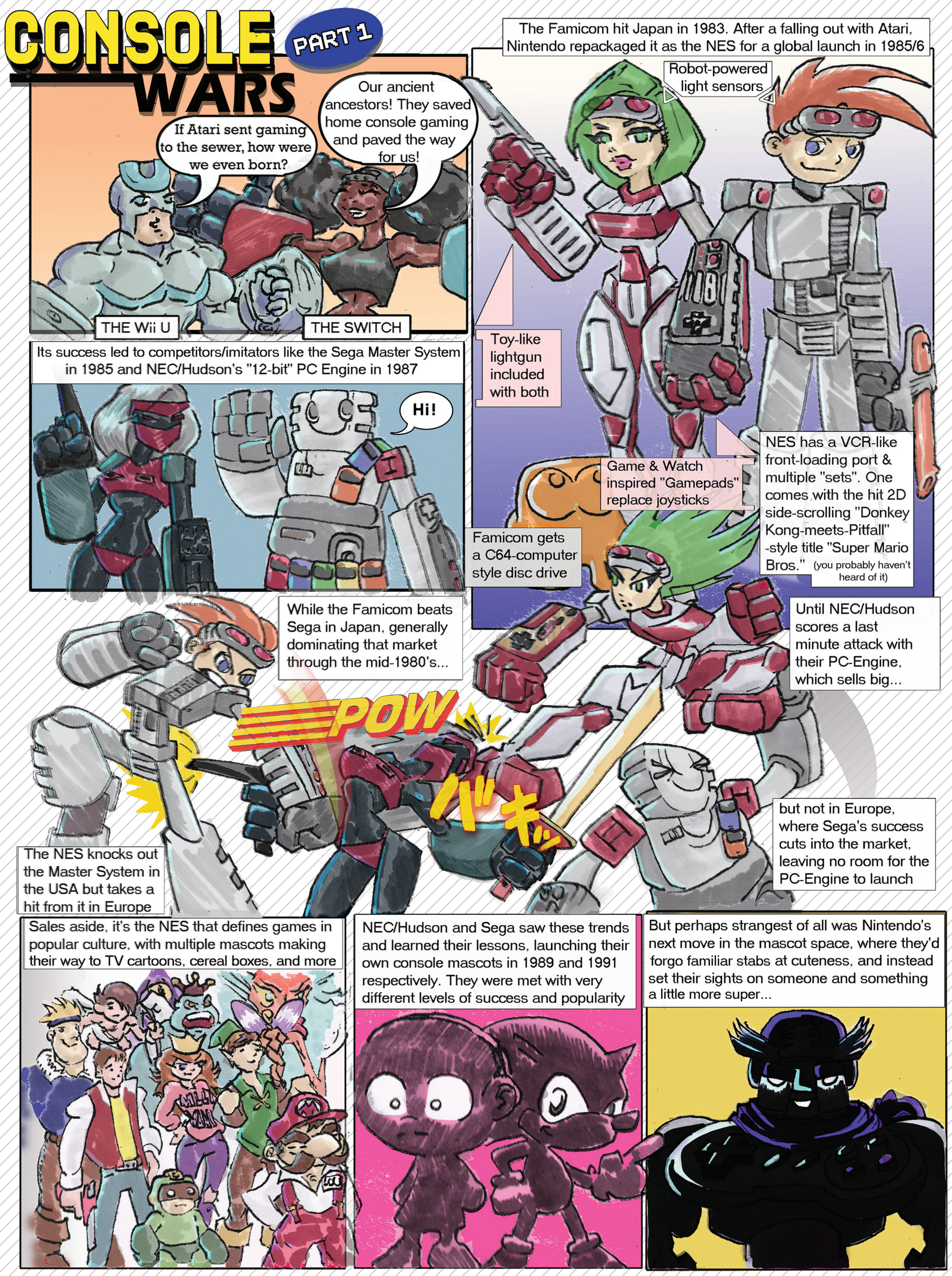
If online discourse is anything to go by, I must be the only person on the planet who thinks Tom Holland looks *nothing* like Link.

BRETT: He looks nothing like Nathan Drake either, but that didn't stop them!

JONATHAN: Wait, I just put it together that people actually want Movie Link to be played by Movie Spider-Man, and Spider-Man is the star of the biggest PlayStation game of the last year. And that under Movie Spider-Man's mask is . . . the face of Movie Nathan Drake.

It's almost as bad of an idea as having William Shatner star in a new Star Wars movie.

That said, if they formally make it a multi-universe crossover, where Nathan Drake is bit by a radioactive spider before discovering the Triforce in a museum and being transported to the magical land of Hyrule, where he must use his treasure-stealing, sword-swinging, web-spinning and hookshotting powers to defeat Willem Dafoe as Green Golbindorf, I'd buy three tickets for opening day. One seat for me, and two on either side of me so I have room to have full-body convulsions of joy for the whole 90 minutes.



BY JONATHAN HOLMES & PETE MARSHALL

NINTENDO'S ORIGINAL VISUAL REMASTER

SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS
SNES, 1993

What better way to show off the new Super Nintendo's souped-up visuals than with a direct comparison to the outgoing 8-bit era? Super Mario All-Stars took the original trilogy of Super Mario Bros. games from the NES and gave them all a graphical overhaul. Extra detail abounded in every scene, from more complicated background layers to subtle animations applied to the scenery (the static bushes from the NES transformed into tufts of grass waving gently in the wind on the SNES, for one example). The gameplay of each title remained unchanged, other than some slightly different physics that felt most apparent in SMB1. But hey, give Nintendo a break! They'd never really ported any of their older titles to newer hardware before this point! I'd say All-Stars was still entirely stellar. — **LUCAS**

20 YEARS LATER

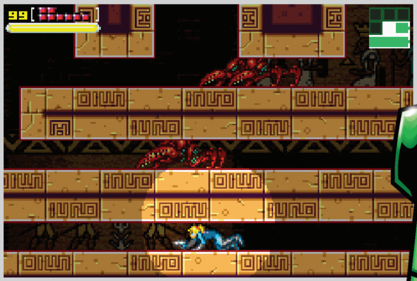
METROID: ZERO MISSION

Remembering one of Nintendo's most ambitious and impressive remakes!

BY GOING BACK to the start, Metroid: Zero Mission paved the way for Samus Aran's future. Before this 2004 GBA classic, our girl's look was all over the place. One second, she was a green-haired, pink leotard-loving anime gal with an arm cannon. The next she was a purple-haired bodybuilder with massive flesh-and-blood guns in official artwork for the Super Metroid guidebook, or a big-haired blonde in black underwear in that game's special ending. Canonically speaking, Samus' appearance outside her suit was once as unpredictable as it was mysterious! That all changed with Zero Mission's retelling of her origin story, which not only established her out-of-armor look once and for all, but also set the 2D branch of the brand down the road it's still on today.

Metroid 1 on the NES is sort of a mess. Don't get me wrong, I love it with all my heart – but only because I have a masochistic streak! Gaming's initial introduction to the alien world of Zebes feels hostile and incomprehensible in ways that are too alienating for most people. It's scary. Exciting! But also frustrating and occasionally broken. That made Metroid 1 a "prime" candidate for this top-to-bottom remake, which stayed true to the source material while adding copious quality-of-life improvements and all-new content.

Samus is still on a mission to destroy Mother Brain and her Space Pirates, but now she's doing it with realistic proportions, an arsenal of new moves and an actual map on her pause screen. New objectives are spelled out here too, but exactly how to get to them always remains in question. Along the way, new enemies and challenges are peppered throughout, like an optional battle against a traveling mid-boss that can give her the power to charge her shots.



While Fusion veered the franchise into a cramped, claustrophobic corner, Zero Mission opened it up again, with a larger map and more opportunities to go off the beaten path.

Most of the power-ups in the game come from either Metroid 1, 2 or 3, making for sort of a greatest hits of her pre-Fusion Suit abilities. You'll pick them all up at a steady pace if you head toward the markers on the map, making Zero Mission feel a tad more prescriptive than those three titles at first. But those who want to dig into all the secrets and sequence-breaking opportunities will find so many ways to challenge themselves. Multiple abilities, areas of the map, and even a boss or two can be skipped through use of high-skill maneuvers like Shinesparking and Ballsparking. These same abilities were also key to making Metroid Dread, the latest 2D title in the franchise, a delight for folks who love discovering alternate ways to win.

And the way Samus wins this time is a true stunner: After defeating Mother Brain, she's forced back to Zebes, stripped of her armor, with no choice but to stealthily invade a new Space Pirate stronghold, and without the use of lethal force! This was where Samus' signature "Zero Suit" and hair-trigger stun gun first hit the scene, before becoming staples of the Smash Bros. series roster. And while I'm still attached to her old-school green-haired Justin Bailey look, there's no denying that the Zero Suit version of Samus is a true Nintendo icon, right up there with Mario's red-and-blue ensemble.

After getting her armor back by beating a mirror-toting Chozo ghost(!?), her mission comes to a head as she confronts . . . an unfinished Ridley robot in an attic? Fighting a vanity project created by Samus' least favorite alien dragon man feels a little anticlimactic, though it's just the kind of Space Pirate side project Samus might have expected to discover while snooping around her nemesis' residence.

After a second signature escape sequence, it's all over, capping off the perfect halfway point in the history of the Metroid series. People who've only played Dread will feel right at home, but so will retro purists who name Metroid 1 or Super as their favorite. It even has some elements in common with Prime and Other M! 20 years later, Zero Mission is arguably the only entry in the Metroid franchise that zero fans can find much fault with. **– JONATHAN**

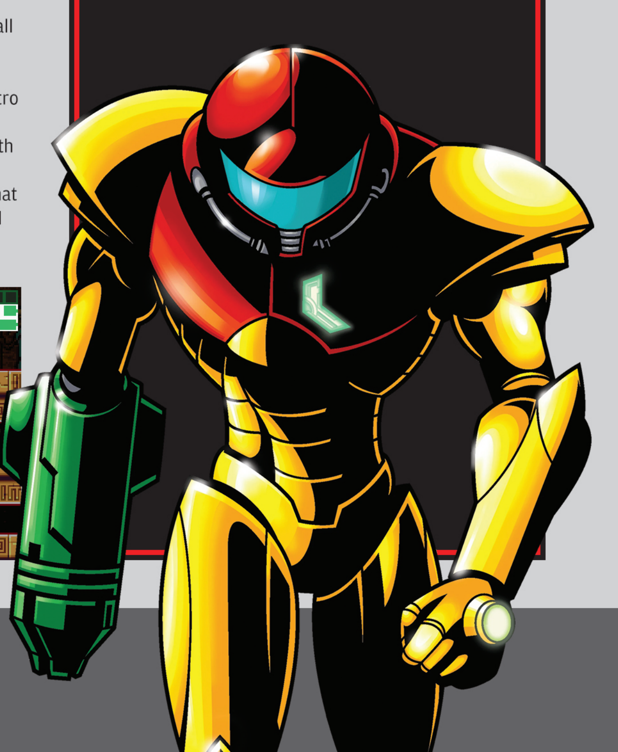
ORIGINAL RELEASE: GAME BOY ADVANCE, FEBRUARY 9, 2004 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NINTENDO R&D1

PLAYING IT TODAY

As its two-decade anniversary approaches, Metroid: Zero Mission has still only been made available officially two times: Through its original GBA cartridge release, and then once more as a Wii U Virtual Console download in 2016. As the Wii U eShop is now shuttered, tracking down a cart is your only current option – those can be found on eBay for mostly reasonable prices. Switch Online subscribers may want to wait, though – Metroid Fusion was added to the NSO GBA lineup a little over a year ago, so there's a decent chance Zero Mission could join it there.

TWO-SUITED

Zero Mission's introduction of the Zero Suit established an official dual identity for Samus! This was reinforced a few years later, when Super Smash Bros. Brawl introduced Final Smash moves – unleashing a Final Smash while playing as the "normal" Samus in her Power Suit would blow her Power Suit off, making players then have to command Zero Suit Samus thereafter!



ORIGINAL RELEASE: SUPER FAMICOM, JANUARY 21, 1994 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

ORIGINAL RELEASE: NINTENDO DS, JULY 15, 2010 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

THE FANS' FIXES

As is often the case with high-profile first-party releases that Nintendo deigns not to bring to the West, fans have stepped in to do the work that NOA wouldn't: Excellent fan translations exist for both the 1994 and 2010 versions of this adventure! The Japanese version of Monshō no Nazo is also playable through the NSO Super Famicom selection – have Google Translate at the ready on your phone and try it out!

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION

FIRE EMBLEM: MONSHŌ NO NAZO & FIRE EMBLEM: SHIN MONSHŌ NO NAZO

A remake, and a remake of that remake. And we got neither one!

AS WE HONOR the 20th anniversary of the remake of Metroid 1, let us also celebrate the 30th anniversary of the remake of Fire Emblem 1!

. . . What? Not feeling particularly nostalgic for this one? Well, it's understandable why: While fans in Japan are surely filled with fond memories for Monshō no Nazo, gamers living elsewhere around the world aren't, since it's one of the many early Fire Emblem games that never got released outside Nintendo's homeland.

This isn't the first time we've tackled this topic. Eight years ago, in NF #19, I wrote a whole-franchise Fire Emblem retrospective here in the Retro section as the release of Fire Emblem Fates drew near. Within that article, I lamented the lack of English-language releases of the earliest Emblem installments, saying those titles "will never get official localizations at this point."

And then, five years after that, one of them did.

It's since been pulled from the Switch eShop since it was just a limited-time release, but in celebration of the 30th anniversary of Fire Emblem 1, Nintendo actually sold an English-language localization of it for about four months starting on December 4, 2020. So . . . there's actually a shred of hope for the others now? I'm not going to claim that any further long-overdue localizations are guaranteed, but I feel they're no longer *impossible* now, so at least that's something.

If we were to get another one, I'd say this game, Monshō no Nazo (a.k.a. "Mystery of the Emblem") would be the next best contender. Because a big chunk of its script is already officially translated! This game was a remake of Fire Emblem 1, so if NOA really wanted to, they could take the same script already used back in 2020 for the Switch release of the 8-bit version of this same quest and reuse it for this 16-bit edition.

. . . Unfortunately, things are a little more complex than that. Because while Monshō no Nazo was a Fire Emblem 1 remake, it also kept going with additional content beyond where Prince Marth's first quest cut off. It was separated into two "Books" – Book 1 was the Fire Emblem 1 remake, and Book 2 was an all-new story. And because Book 2 was so content-dense, the developers at Intelligent Systems had to actually cut some chapters and characters out of Book 1 to make it all fit!

Still with me? OK, here's the next chapter of this twisted tale: After Nintendo of America finally started localizing the Fire Emblem series for English-speaking audiences, they graciously let us play another version of Prince Marth's first quest, in the form of a *second* remake of Fire Emblem 1 made for the DS. It was called Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon, and it launched in 2009. It was a great release, but only covered the "Book 1" original Marth story, leaving "Book 2" still on the table.

So Nintendo did *another* remake! Fire Emblem: Shin Monshō no Nazo came to the DS next . . . but only in Japan. Again! Ever since NOA started releasing Fire Emblem games in English, it's the only one that's stayed on the other side of the Pacific. So we missed out on playing Marth's second quest in the West yet again, and also missed seeing the origin point of gameplay and narrative innovations like "My Unit," the in-game avatar character that ultimately inspired the creation of Robin in the series' next sequel, Awakening.

Did you get all that? It's a lot to parse, for sure. The TLDR of it all is that the Fire Emblem series still has a lot of installments that have never been made officially available in English, but there's now a slim chance that we could one day see them in the West if the Switch release of Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light back in 2020 wasn't just a one-off event. If it were up to me, and I were calling the shots at NOA, I'd have a whole development team established that would only work to localize old first-party titles that never got English releases in their original eras. There are at least a few development teams doing just that kind of work for other companies' back catalogs! **– LUCAS**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE NP CREW rang in a simply *monstrous* 1999 with a "Monster Review" of Konami's attempt to take the whip-cracking Castlevania series into 3D, weighing in at a whopping 10 pages long (to say nothing of the cover). It was joined by a veritable symphony of coverage for other Nintendo 64 titles, including South Park: Deeply Impacted (later just "South Park"), BattleTanx, FIFA '99, Shadowgate 64 (Remember Shadowgate? It's back! In 3D form!), Nightmare Creatures, Fox Sports College Hoops '99, Charlie Blast's Territory, NBA Jam '99 and NHL Breakaway '99, plus O.D.T. and Turok 2, which shared the coveted poster positions.

While returns on Game Boy investments had been diminishing for a while by '99, the new Game Boy Color pumped some fresh life into the aging handheld scene. This issue in particular kicked off with another legendary Nintendo remake: The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening DX! Joining it were the Looney Tunes title Carrot Crazy, Gex: Enter the Gecko and Montezuma's Return.

Though not quite as exciting as what we'd seen in years prior, this year's January issue did have a few bonuses. One was a tongue-in-cheek look at how Nintendo caused all the biggest pop-culture moments of the past year, while on the opposite page, Mario and Wario gave their predictions for the year to come in 1999. (Sadly, Wario predicting a movie starring himself and Ganondorf inspired by the Waialae Country Club game never came to pass). In addition, there were some neat Star Wars: Rogue Squadron stickers and a Pokémon Red/Blue calendar/poster.

Wrapping things up, the Player's Poll winners got a trip to the NCAA Final Four in Tampa, among other neat prizes, and Pak Watch previewed Infogrames' (now Atari) Looney Tunes titles, Snowboard Kids 2 and Beetle Adventure Racing.

In February, we were all ready to party like it was . . . wait, it really was 1999. And NP was ready too, with Mario leading the way for a Mario Party cover feature! In addition, there were features on Rayman 2: The Great Escape, WCW Nitro, Beetle Adventure Racing, Vigilante 8, yet more The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (which shared the poster with Rampage 2: Universal Tour), Penny Racers, more Castlevania and more Snowboard Kids 2.

In Game Boy Color Land, there was a lot of hex-citement for Hexcite: The Shapes of Victory, Turok 2, Legend of the Sea King GB (no relation to Seaking the Pokémon) and Shadowgate Classic. Oh, and if you thought NP was done riding the Pokémon train, there was a Pokémon Game Link Special, exploring all the stuff you can do with a friend, including some homebrew match rules!

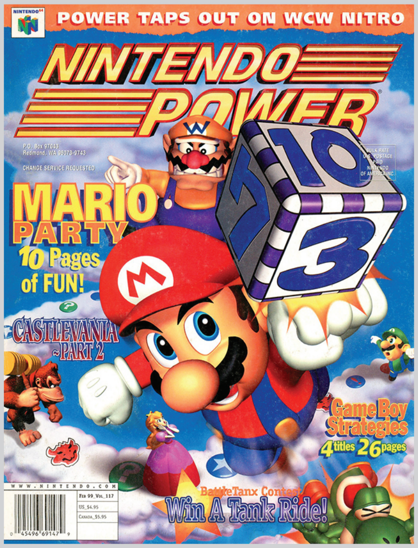
In addition to the Mario Party coverage and Player's Poll, an additional contest sought to have Nintendo Power bring the party to a few lucky Power Players, as one grand prize winner would get a Nintendo 64, a copy of Mario Party, three extra controllers and $100 for pizza and soft drinks. Another contest for Penny Racers would see the grand prize winner's design turned into an actual Penny Racer, while second prize winners would have to just make do with a copy of the game.

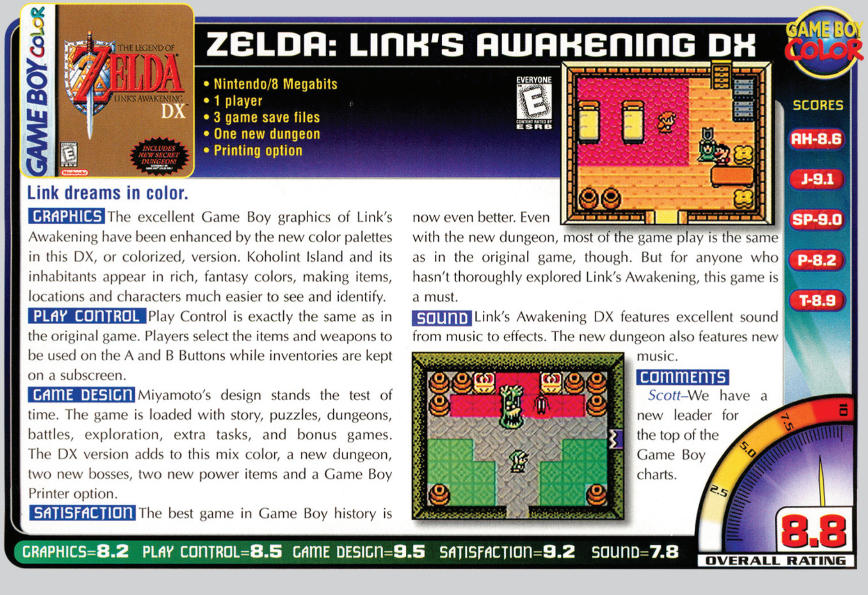
As for the actual Player's Poll winners, they simply got to go for a ride . . . in a tank! And meet the developers of BattleTanx, get themselves put into BattleTanx and, last but not least, receive a copy of BattleTanx. Second place was good too, with winners receiving an RC tank and the game.

Finally, Pak Watch looked ahead by taking us back to the beginning with a peek at another remake in the works: Super Mario Bros. Deluxe for the Game Boy Color, along with The New Tetris, Duke Nukem, Mario Golf and more! — **DAVID**

ISSUE #116: JANUARY 1999

ISSUE #117: FEBRUARY 1999





ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING DX

- Nintendo/8 Megabits
- 1 player
- 3 game save files
- One new dungeon
- Printing option

SCORES: AH-8.6, J-9.1, SP-9.0, P-8.2, T-8.9

Link dreams in color.

GRAPHICS The excellent Game Boy graphics of Link's Awakening have been enhanced by the new color palettes in this DX, or colorized, version. Koholint Island and its inhabitants appear in rich, fantasy colors, making items, locations and characters much easier to see and identify.

PLAY CONTROL Play Control is exactly the same as in the original game. Players select the items and weapons to be used on the A and B Buttons while inventories are kept on a subscreen.

GAME DESIGN Miyamoto's design stands the test of time. The game is loaded with story, puzzles, dungeons, battles, exploration, extra tasks, and bonus games. The DX version adds to this mix color, a new dungeon, two new bosses, two new power items and a Game Boy Printer option.

SATISFACTION The best game in Game Boy history is now even better. Even with the new dungeon, most of the game play is the same as in the original game, though. But for anyone who hasn't thoroughly explored Link's Awakening, this game is a must.

SOUND Link's Awakening DX features excellent sound from music to effects. The new dungeon also features new music.

COMMENTS
Scott–We have a new leader for the top of the Game Boy charts.

GRAPHICS=8.2 PLAY CONTROL=8.5 GAME DESIGN=9.5 SATISFACTION=9.2 SOUND=7.8

8.8 OVERALL RATING

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
February 27, 1980, in Northridge, California – just like Captain N!

FAVORITE FOOD
Ramen

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
At Anime Expo '99, a couple of guys basically tried to crash our hotel and demanded our beds. I challenged them to a two-on-one stock match in Smash Bros. for the room, and won! I even grabbed a Heart Container before the final blow for maximum swag.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Game Director at WayForward

BEST KNOWN FOR
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night, Contra 4, Spidersaurs, Silent Hill: Shattered Memories, Goosebumps: The Game, Rocket Knight (2010), The Mummy Demastered, Contact, Trauma Center: Under the Knife

TOMM HULETT

Meet the man who's leading the charge, guns blazing, to make the all-new Contra: Operation Galuga!

NF: First up, can you tell us the story of how you first became interested in video games?

TOMM HULETT: One rainy day in kindergarten (or even first grade, possibly), my Mom thought to dust off their old Atari 2600 and shoebox of games, starting with Space Invaders, then probably Donkey Kong or Pac-Man (her favorites). I felt plugged into something just beyond reality! It was incredible. It was like pure imagination you could play. This was right at the cusp of NES mania, so my parents did the logical thing and got me a deep-discounted 7800 with Pole Position II.

My best friend ended up with a TI-99, but soon graduated up with the rest of my peers to NES, and hit games from Nintendo, Konami and Capcom – but since they had every day to master them, whenever I visited my turn was over fast and I just sat and watched.

But during a visit to friends of my parents, which we did every few months, I found out their daughter Heather also had Atari. She was older, but had tuberous sclerosis and she was very nervous about social interaction; we instantly bonded over Atari games. While I was always buying the most advanced games I could find (Adventure, Mario Bros., Commando, Vanguard), Heather had all the classics like Pitfall!, Dig Dug and even Swordquest.

We loved our weird little world of outcast games, but eventually my parents relented (probably due to pressure from my best friend's parents) and my shiny new NES arrived on Christmas 1988. Things only escalated from there.

(As for Heather, I was excited to show her the latest NES games whenever they visited. Eventually she got an SNES, and Super Mario World, and I helped show her the last few exits she missed and complete the Special World.)

You ultimately decided to pursue making video games as a profession. What was your first job in the industry, and what path did you take from there to arrive at WayForward?

Several years and one move to Orange County later, I'd put quite a bit more time into honing my NES skills. One of our neighbors worked for Virgin Games, and while I rattled off about whatever stage I was able to reach in Battletoads at the time (the snakes or beyond) he stopped me to ask if that was past the Turbo Tunnel. I told him of course it was, and he went back to tell his coworkers (who could not pass the Turbo Tunnel) that he knew a 12-year-old who could beat it. It seems the Virgin staff was frustrated because marketing kept telling them to make easier games so kids could beat them. I was to be their secret weapon to prove their games were perfectly fine for children of all ages! That neighbor set me up with a summer job testing games every Friday. I got a paycheck and everything! To buy more games! My first official gig was testing Global Gladiators for the Sega Genesis.

Using that experience, I started an indie dev studio in college with my best friend and some Internet folks, which was my introduction to Atlus, where I eventually got hired for QA, and then localization. Then I jumped to Konami as an associate producer, where I worked with lots of great companies, including WayForward. When they had an opening for a director, I somehow convinced them that could be me.

Since being at WayForward, how many titles have you been involved with developing, and what role did you play on each team?

At WayForward I've directed 10 titles, I believe (not all of them released), and helped with level design on LIT (for mobile/Steam) and The Mummy Demastered. Bannon Rudis also got me a gig selling games in River City when times were tough.

Your newest role is directing the brand-new Contra: Operation Galuga, the latest installment in a franchise that dates all the way back to the '80s. What is it about Contra as a series that has given it such staying power over the decades? And what does Contra mean to you, personally?

Contra embodies the essence of the run-'n'-gun genre. The many varied weapons mean that even during the pattern-based enemy spawns, the player is encouraged to improvise, especially when they make a mistake. You have to press onward, even after losing your favorite weapon, so you grab whatever is available and keep fighting. Two skilled players might have entirely different weapon preferences and paths through a stage. Speaking of two players, Contra was also the first simultaneous multiplayer experience a lot of gamers had in the 8-bit years, and that's a powerful cultural memory.

Personally, the original Contra games represented Hollywood action films you could play. In fact, I played Contra before I ever saw most of the films that inspired it! So I think those moments of spectacle built around actual gameplay so the player can't believe they're overcoming something incredible – those are key. But, ever since the genre split off into first-person shooters in the early '90s, the classic run-'n'-gun has felt endangered. Having worked on Contra 4, and now Operation Galuga, it's close to my heart as something we need to preserve.

Operation Galuga seems to be a remake of the original Contra – at least in part. It clearly jumps off of that springboard and brings in plenty of elements that the good old NES never could've handled! How would you categorize Operation Galuga? Is calling it a remake accurate? Or a remaster? Reimagining? Standalone sequel? We want to get the preferred terminology straight, you know!

This is tricky, because I think so many people define each term differently. I believe we're calling it a reimagining officially, but let me describe it.

Regarding the story, this is a new telling of the original Contra mission on Galuga. The key details are the same, but there is a lot of new world-building context and more characters involved to tell a more complete story.

As far as the actual stages you play, this is a brand-new game. Many of the settings are familiar, but the stages themselves have all-new designs, down to the enemies and bosses you encounter. If you've never played Contra before you can dive right in; the legacy starts here (again!). But if you are a longtime veteran, we've got all-new challenges for you to face.

WayForward first worked with the Contra series to develop Contra 4, which launched on the Nintendo DS in 2007. Has Operation Galuga felt like a homecoming for the team at WayForward after all these years?

It's an honor to be entrusted with such a venerable brand even once, but to be given the keys again must've felt like a, well . . . double honor?!

LIKE THE ORIGINAL CONTRA GAME FROM DECADES AGO, OPERATION GALUGA WILL KICK OFF ITS ACTION IN A WATERLOGGED JUNGLE THAT'S ABSOLUTELY SWARMING WITH ENEMIES READY TO BE BLASTED TO BITS. BILL RIZER AND LANCE BEAN ARE EAGER TO DO JUST THAT!

It's the double-est of honors! Contra 4 is one of the games that really put WayForward on the map for a lot of players, and it was incredibly validating to have Konami approach us to work together again. I think the two games will be really interesting to compare in the end — since we are now more mature and experienced, both as a company and as game-making individuals.

One of the gameplay innovations Contra 4 introduced was giving players a grappling hook. What kinds of gameplay tweaks to the classic running and gunning can we expect from Operation Galuga? Will it reach back into the past to bring back mechanics from previous installments? Will it have brand-new ideas we've never seen before?
All the characters have distinct sets of abilities, which may be familiar to fans of the series and its outliers, or similar action titles. (And this includes the grappling hook!) Depending on who you use, you have a different combination of moves which should inform your overall strategy.

Our newest mechanic is called the Overload. Any time you have a special weapon equipped, you can sacrifice it for a big, helpful effect. Some of these are huge offensive attacks; others are more strategic, like slowing down time. This is just another way Contra's classic weapon pickups give the player freedom to improvise.

There are additional ways to customize your playstyle, which aren't actual moves or abilities per se, but may allow you to play Contra in ways you never have before.

The Contra series is known for over-the-top action sequences, like the time Contra III had players riding on a missile as it blazed through the sky, or Contra 4 had us fighting a laser-shooting giant fish while riding a jetski, or Super C had us descending into the depths of an alien fortress made of living tissue. Can you tease us with some of the wild scenarios Operation Galuga might throw at us?
I want to maintain our surprises, but there are definitely over-the-top sequences! Some take place during boss encounters, while others are sprinkled through the stages. One thing we do throughout is use the fact that the game is using 3D assets, so even though gameplay progresses in 2D, the stage and camera may rotate or curve to a new path as you proceed. This can be quite dramatic, especially in our auto-scrolling stages.

Contra's also all about its amazing arsenal. What kinds of weapons will we be wielding this time? And which weapon would you consider your personal favorite?
The core Contra weapons are so perfect, aren't they? Ever since Contra 4, I've sort of challenged myself to come up with additional weapons that would fit alongside them (not for a specific game, just as a mental exercise). It's not easy! We showcased some new ideas in Spidersaurs, but Contra is the big leagues. So, naturally, we have that core set of Contra classics. But, when you stack them, they take on new properties that may surprise players. We worked carefully to balance all of these so they're valid in many situations.

But beyond that core Contra set, there is a set of alternate weapons — each with their own stacking changes and Overloads. This includes a lot of callbacks throughout the Contra series, where we may have borrowed familiar concepts and then crafted them into this game. Similar to abilities, different characters have different weapon setups, giving each one a unique feel and strategy.

My personal favorite? Level 2 Laser. It ricochets to nearby targets so it's great when you're getting mobbed.

You mentioned earlier that one of the critical elements that made Contra on the NES such a classic was its support of two-player co-op. But Operation Galuga is amping that up to four-player simultaneous action! How do you handle making that manageable? Is four-player mode going to be just pure bullet-slinging chaos? And, as a developer, how do you design levels in such a way that they work and flow well for any number of players between one and four?
It's definitely chaos, but managed chaos. The important factor we kept in mind was in the original Contra, having a friend always made the game more manageable. Yes, we do raise the number of enemies (especially in 4p!) and the boss HP increases significantly, but never to the degree that your friend has made the game less manageable.

Our level design has been really expansive for this project. When you play on different difficulties, rather than simply nudging enemy stats, we actually created new enemy layouts (this affects the amount of power-ups too). Then as mentioned above, additional changes are made depending on the number of players. Lastly, when you play in Arcade Mode, bosses will have additional behaviors and attacks beyond what they do in Story Mode.

So our first concern was making sure players could continue to progress in skill as they mastered one setting, then moved on to the next. We want them to need to revise what they learned, as well as increase their skills. Then with four players, we want there to always be enough enemies to shoot, and enough power-ups to go around. Then we tested the heck out of it and made a lot of adjustments along the way.

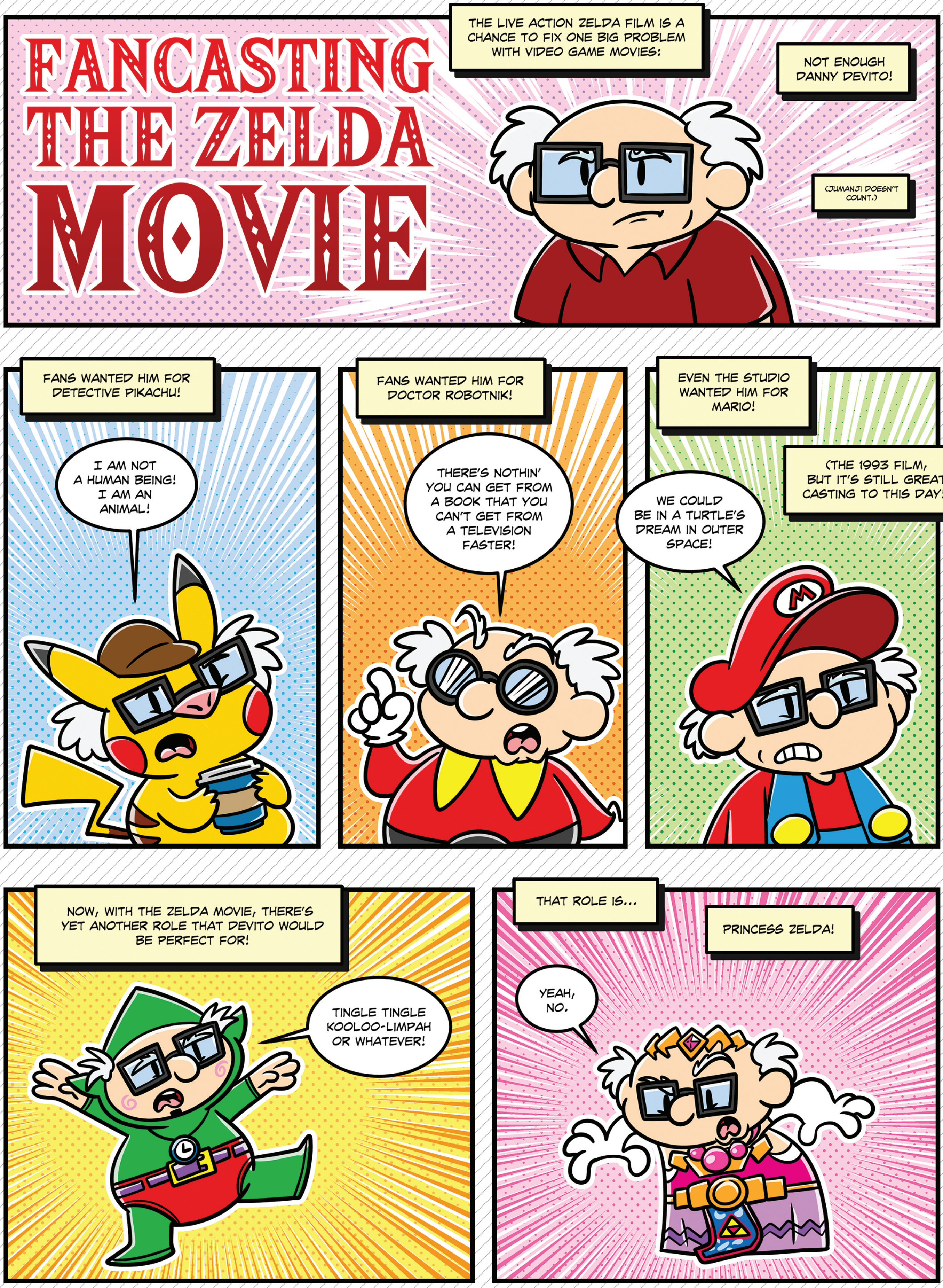
Supporting more players means you need more playable characters, beyond just Bill and Lance! Four different faces have to be available at the very least. So who's on the character select screen this time around? And will there be any secret, unlockable choices?
Besides Bill and Lance, we've introduced a number of characters. There are, of course, the Probotectors, who may be of interest to our European players. Then as you progress the story, you'll meet Ariana, who lives on Galuga and has been fighting off the Red Falcon for some time; Stanley Ironside, the leader of the GX Army who was deployed a little bit earlier than the Contra unit; and Lucia, who begins as your support staff but soon travels to the island to join the battle herself.

You'll encounter an NPC or two along the way as well, and as for hidden characters . . . I wouldn't rule it out.

The Konami Code. Is it in?
Would I show my face in public if it wasn't?

Finally, the classic interview-ending question: If you could have any superpower, what would it be, and why?
I've been incredibly fortunate in life, ever since that radioactive video game bit me as a child, giving me the ability to design video games and cling to walls and ceilings. It would be selfish to ask for more than that.

JOINING BILL AND LANCE IN THIS BIGGEST-EVER CONTRA BATTLE ARE NEW CHARACTERS LIKE ARIANA, AND UP TO FOUR PLAYERS CAN TAKE UP ARMS AGAINST THE INVADING ALIEN ENEMIES TOGETHER! (THE ACTION'S EVEN MORE FRANTIC WHEN YOU PLAY WITH FOUR!)



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

REVIEWS

The SNES classic **Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars** has just received what may very well be the most faithful, most endearing and most smile-inducing remake we could've ever hoped to see. We just can't keep the grins off our faces! We've put its polished-up quest back through its paces, so be sure to read our review!

One Radically Remarkable Remake

SUPER MARIO RPG

SOMETIMES A WISH seems too impossible to even wish for.

Like, you feel that you need to have some shred of confidence that there's even a *possibility* it could come true, or else you can't bring yourself to invest your hopes into it to begin with. Even when it's just a wish! Even when it's just a dream – some happening that you know would bring you real happiness, if only it would happen.

I never thought this would happen.

Super Mario RPG getting a full-blown, totally faithful, earnestly loving remake is an event that seemed so far removed from the realm of possibility that it's honestly not something I ever spent any time even considering. I've hoped for a remake of Chrono Trigger, and felt confident enough to wish for that given all the other remakes that Square Enix has been publishing in recent years. I wished for a remake of Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door, spurred on by the community full of more vocal fans than me who called for it first – and that hope turned out to be well invested. But this one? Super Mario RPG? The game that's been so legally tied up for decades that even getting simple cameos from its characters has felt like an insane ask? No, I never thought it would happen. Never thought it could. Never wished for it at all!

And yet, against all odds, it's real. Super Mario RPG is here, it's been fully remade, and it is radically remarkable.

Mario sets out on a quest to rescue Princess Peach in this adventure, but that quest comes to a conclusion after just the first few minutes of play – battling Bowser in his castle is all just preamble to a much larger and more epic journey. A colossal sword falls from the sky and interrupts the rivals' battle, plunging itself into the middle of Bowser's Keep, scattering everyone inside across the world and, in the process, shattering the celestial Star Road where wishes go before they're granted. Now, they can never be!

That story setup remains the same here as it first was back in 1996, but this remake revises the old opening cutscene to actually show the gigantic sword, Exor, piercing the Star Road and breaking it into pieces. It's just the first of many moments in which scenes have been rethought, revamped and made better. The story is the same, but now it's better told.

And that's the vibe for every other aspect of this remake too: Everything feels faithful to the original game, but it's all just enhanced. Cleaner visuals. Clearer sound. Gameplay that's all just turned up a notch in control and convenience.

I've been privileged to once again be able to experience this new release through both old and young eyes, too: While I've been able to play through Super Mario RPG and enjoy all the ways it's been improved compared to my memories of first playing the SNES original, I've also gotten to see my sons experience it for the first time without that before/after contrast entering in to inform their opinions. Carter has been having a blast running through his own save file, and the rest have watched and cheered him on.

My 5-year-old and 4-year-old, Cooper and Colson, have especially enjoyed the character of Mallow – or, as they've named him, the Mashed Potato Guy. One of the remake's best additions is a screen where all the party members dance to celebrate Level Ups, and my boys gleefully hop up off the couch to join in with Mallow as he performs his cheerful "Mashed Potato Dance" each time. Watching them have so much fun with this – just as observers, and not even playing it directly themselves – is exactly the kind of moment I hoped to experience as a father sharing video games with his kids. This is the magic, people.

Going in to playing this (I'm shifting back to talking about before/after comparison stuff now), I was a bit concerned that the battles would be too easy when held up against the 1996 balancing of the combat. And, having played through the quest now, I think those concerns were justified: Battles *are* just easier overall now. But that's not really a bad thing. Making combat easier opens up the game to younger players, after all. An optional Hard mode could've been nice, but maybe they'll add that with a later update.

Fights are easier to win in three ways. First, expertly hitting your timed hits builds up a "chain," and damage is increased with higher chain numbers. Second, a new percentage gauge also fills up throughout each battle, and once it hits 100% you can unleash one of six different Triple Attacks that do a ton of damage or a huge amount of healing. Third, you can swap party members in and out! I didn't even know that was a thing, so I didn't say anything about it in our previews! But after you recruit Bowser as the fourth fighter, you gain the ability to instantly bring whichever party members are currently on standby into a fight even while it's ongoing. That was never a thing on SNES. Now, if Geno gets hit by, say, a Sleep attack, you can just shuffle him out of the active squad of three fighters and bring in a reserve. You don't even lose a turn doing that! All of it just makes battle so breezy, and keeps you rolling right along through the story.

The other half of the gameplay, the isometric platforming sequences with Mario, are still a little touchy and still a bit hard to handle with precision – but there aren't too many moments that demand precision. (There's one climbing vine on the way to Nimbus Land that I absolutely just could *not* manage to grab, though, so if they want to go ahead and patch that spot, I wouldn't argue with them.)

I like how the Triple Attacks were introduced so naturally in the Bowyer boss fight, slotting in so easily that it seems like they were always there. I like that all of the original characters and different kinds of Toads are all back, and none of them have been watered down or replaced with newer, "safer" versions. I like that most of the old dialogue has been preserved, and that even where things like enemy names have been changed, the new ones make sense to me.

I like just about everything about this wonderful remake! It's honestly spot-on to what I would've wished a Super Mario RPG remake would be, had I had the confidence to even wish for it in the first place.

To all of you who did have the hope and who did send that wish up to the Star Road, thank you! Your wish has finally come true, and all of us get to benefit from it too! **– LUCAS**

9.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ARTEPIAZZA
RATING: E

Style Savvy's Spiritual Successor

FASHION DREAMER

FIRST OPINION

SINCE THE SWITCH first arrived on the scene, Style Savvy fans have been hoping that the series would make the transition to Nintendo's new console. When over two years passed with nothing on the horizon, I lobbied Lucas to cover a Japanese import fashion game, Model Debut #nicola, in the hopes that it would be localized. (It was not.) When Fashion Dreamer was announced in February 2023's Nintendo Direct, many fans were optimistic that it would be the return they wanted! However, there were two big differences: Developer syn Sophia's relationship with Nintendo had ended, necessitating a switch to publisher XSEED/Marvelous, and the focus would be less on store management and more on the social media aspects of fashion. The results are mixed.

Fashion Dreamer is like Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer, in that it's a sandbox game with a focus on creativity. While your goal is to become a popular stylist in the online world of Eve (no, not *that* EVE), there are three methods at your disposal: styling Lookits for NPCs and other Muses, taking and posting photos of your Muse, and crafting new outfits. It's a great pick-up-and-play title, but the gameplay gets monotonous fast. Copy an outfit, style a new one, get points and tickets. Find an NPC with a quest marker, fulfill their request, get points and tickets. Lace up, button, repeat! It takes a lot of work to get new NPCs to come to the Cocoons, and it's a lot faster to do it in solo-play mode – but be prepared to do a lot of running around looking for that elusive heart-shaped exclamation point.

Where Fashion Dreamer really shines is through creating and showcasing your own designs and Muses. Designs can be created by leveling up, winning them from gacha machines, or by being given to you from NPCs, and once you've got a base piece you can change the color scheme however you like. The only issue is that your inventory can be bogged down by multiples of the same color, meaning you'll have to do a lot of inventory management as your collection grows larger.

There are a few areas I thought needed serious improvement.

First, the inventory screen. While you can filter specific garment types and make "favorites" pages, you can't filter by color, pattern or subtype like we could in Style Savvy. It's OK when you're starting out, but as your wardrobe grows, it takes longer and longer to scroll down to what you're looking for, and it's also laggy. (To be fair, the Style Savvy games had this problem as well.)

Second, many of the player-created showrooms are difficult to move around in, thanks to displays being blocked by ceiling decorations or other objects. The showroom designer needs to show some sort of color coding – or not let you save if you have a display or mannequin that is inaccessible. Or have some sort of cursor to select individual displays.

Third, when you're viewing the "lucky color" and "recommended item" areas in the Cocoons, there is no option to Like everything at once – you need to go in and manually Like each item.

Finally, the bingo games become utterly useless once you've gotten enough people liking your creations – the winnings from each of them are paltry, and I'd rather see them give out gacha tickets instead of E-points.

After years of waiting for Style Savvy to reappear on the Switch, I had my hopes up for Fashion Dreamer – and while I'm not completely disappointed, there are a lot of areas where the developers could have done a lot better. (I'm hoping that the continued support includes QOL updates as well as fresh 'fits.) This is one of those titles that I feel could've used a little more polish before strutting down the runway. **– REBECCA**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES
DEVELOPER: SYN SOPHIA
RATING: E

7.0

SECOND OPINION

STYLE SAVVY HAS somewhat of a quiet reputation in Nintendo's canon as a hidden gem for more creatively inclined players. In the past, the series has successfully managed to mash up an outfit laboratory with a surprisingly deep (and strongly localized) shop management sim. When the news dropped that developer syn Sophia was finally developing a spiritual follow-up under Marvelous, speculation flared wildly for what a new version of the franchise could look like in its console debut.

Well, what's here is something that often doesn't entirely work, but still occasionally is quite successful – just not in the ways you might expect.

Its open-ended creation-centric design establishes Fashion Dreamer as a fun space for concocting colorful outfits and sharing them online for all to see – exemplified by its *frequent* and mandatory use of the Switch's system-level screenshot tool. When it comes to the primary loop of the game, however, that's . . . just about all there is to do. You make an outfit for yourself, amass every piece of clothing that catches your eye and fulfill vague tasks for shallowly defined NPCs all in service of grinding out various meters representing experience and currency.

While assembling a wardrobe and Lookits is the main draw of the game, this formula begins to wear somewhat thin over its hilariously short runtime, especially once you crack the code of how to farm points *fast*. If this is all the game were, it'd be a fairly hard title to recommend, however . . .

Where Fashion Dreamer began to win my heart over and managed to separate itself from Style Savvy was once I went online to play alongside other virtual designers.

Players can build fun prompts to request what sorts of Lookits they'd want other players to make for them. In my case, I asked for "cool jackets." The enthusiasm other players had for creating very thoughtful Lookits was extremely tangible and a fun incentive to return the favor in kind. They gave me an outfit with that jacket I asked for as a statement piece? Sure, I'd love to make you an amazing outfit right back as thanks.

Visiting showrooms, trading custom garments and crafting outfits all with other players was just the spice this game needed to make it finally feel uniquely interesting. The only problem is that the joy of connecting with others in this game is *immensely* intrinsic. You won't get rewarded with extra points for making someone a Lookit that brightens their day; you truly have to be in it for the pure love of the game.

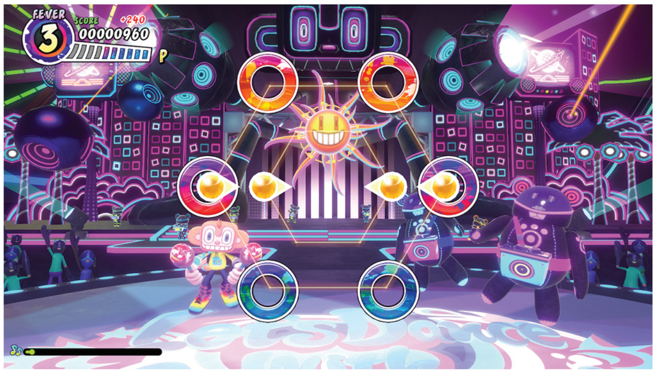
In the middle of writing up our pair of reviews here, syn Sophia actually announced the first major update coming to the game this Winter, adding many of the QOL features that would've gone a long way toward making the launch game more satisfying. These include the ability to save favorite outfits, a longer list of in-game missions past the opening tutorials, a history of players you met in the game and even the ability to create catalogs to showcase packages of your hottest Lookits. That last one feels like a stand-in for Style Savvy's deeper "designer brand" mechanics – just one of the most engaging features that was sorely missing from Fashion Dreamer at first.

When compared to Style Savvy, Fashion Dreamer feels like a sequel with a lot of the meat stripped from its bones. Taken on its own, I think there are some genuinely fascinating social elements that capitalize on the joy of sharing your creations with fellow artists and just flat-out doing something nice for a stranger. It evokes many of the altruistic feelings found in games like Dark Souls and Journey, where much of the fun is found in making meaningful connections with people you'll only meet briefly, and then part ways with.

If more updates are on the way that make these redeeming elements of the game shine, Fashion Dreamer could serve as a fun and welcoming introduction to syn Sophia's fashionista simulators. Right now, the asking price is a bit steep for how little actual gameplay there is (it's currently listed at $49.99 for the digital version and for physical copies), and while the heart of the experience lies in its social elements, it will leave players who are craving more of the old management gameplay feeling very cold.

Once someone shares their favorite jacket with you, though, Fashion Dreamer does start to feel a little warmer. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

6.5



Let's Get This Party Restarted!

SAMBA DE AMIGO: PARTY CENTRAL

THE LAST TIME we saw Samba de Amigo was the port of the Dreamcast original to the Wii in 2008. Swapping out the physical maraca controllers for Wii Remotes seemed like a natural fit! However, the results were disappointing due to the inconsistent accuracy of the controls. Now, almost a decade and a half later, Sega is giving the cult classic rhythm series another shot with Samba de Amigo: Party Central.

For the newly initiated, Samba de Amigo is a Latin-infused entry to the rhythm game canon, tasking players with shaking a pair of controllers up, down and side to side to the beat of the music (with an alternate button-based control scheme as well). It's standard fare as far as gameplay goes, and it provides one heck of a workout amongst visuals that'd feel right at home inside a piñata.

Party Central builds on this foundation with a handful of new modes and an updated songlist. Also new here are quick-bite minigames that will occasionally interrupt songs to challenge players to hit fun poses or complete short diversions like hitting baseballs. (A moment that almost feels like a nod to Rhythm Heaven.)

The gameplay is otherwise largely unchanged from its original form, and can still be extremely fun . . . when it works. Issues arise in how the game detects the angling of the Joy-Cons as they shake around to hit notes. The Joy-Cons' gyro sensors already gained a reputation for requiring constant recalibration during play in some past Switch games, and that issue unfortunately rears its head during Samba de Amigo – in particular, some inputs will sometimes get confused until the controllers can reorient themselves once again. It's easy to brush these issues off when the game is presented as a carefree party diversion, but it still hurts to miss a ton of notes you really know you should be hitting.

The full tracklist is available from the get-go, allowing players to jump right in and start shaking Joy-Cons alone or with friends. There's a bigger emphasis on American radio hits compared to the original game, but the setlist provides inoffensive fun with some exciting musical cameos from Sega games in the first wave of DLC – fans of Space Channel 5, Rhythm Thief and a certain melancholic karaoke tune from Yakuza will be very happy. The only unlockables available are costume parts, which are put to good use in some of the other modes in the game.

There are some novel multiplayer modes that don't mess with the formula aside from adjusting the scoring from competitive to cooperative, along with a single-player "StreamiGo" mode with a myriad of score challenges to appease a virtual streaming audience. The most interesting mode is probably the online battle royale mode that tosses consecutive stages at 20 online players at a time, with the highest scoring players moving on to the next round. Online, the player base is surprisingly healthy – and playing those battles can be a fun way to put your skills to the test. (Again, when the controls work.)

Those alternative modes really serve as a neat distraction, but lack the pull of campaigns found in similar rhythm games. There's enough joy found simply in even just booting up freeplay for a song or two.

For both new and old fans, Party Central functions best as a game to pull out at a real party to get guests up on their feet. It's nice to have a mostly functional version of Samba de Amigo back on consoles, as a fun reminder of the memorable experiments from the most legendary era of Sega's history. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SEGA
RATING: E

Farm in the Light, Battle in the Dark

SILENT HOPE

UNBEKNOWNST TO ME upon picking this game for review, Silent Hope is in the same vein as Harvest Moon and Rune Factory. I only knew because I saw the cows in the dairy! This game has less in common with the blend of farming and romance in Harvest Moon, though, landing closer to the action RPG/farming split seen in Rune Factory. But Silent Hope is its own beast in the end: a dungeon-crawling roguelike action RPG . . . with some farming.

In the world of Silent Hope, the King has seen many tragedies strike his kingdom – but the commoners' hurtful words have shaken him most. He retaliates against his own citizens, using magic to steal their voices and then escaping into the Abyss. He leaves his daughter, the Princess, behind, to pick up the pieces – and she gathers seven heroes to search for her father and uncover the reason for his brash actions.

Each hero has skills that serve them both in battle down in the darkness of the Abyss, as well as in the surface world above. The rogue brandishes daggers, but can also finish wood and other materials for weapon making. The caster carries a wand and uses ranged magic, while also taking on the role of alchemist to make metal from ores. The archer uses a bow and arrow, of course, and tends to the livestock too. And so on and so forth – you pick one hero at a time, and then you dive in!

Most of the gameplay happens in the Abyss – and you need to decide how to tackle the grinding once inside. If you want a well-rounded team, you'll have to play as every character and level up each. This becomes easier once some tougher areas open up, offering more XP, but it's still a slog to keep each hero leveled. I chose the three fighting styles I was the most comfortable with and traded off. My strongest hero would beat bosses and find signal fires for fast travel. Once I came across a Princess Seed, I could choose to pull out another hero and continue on, or head back to the surface to upgrade my inventory.

Enemies generally telegraph attacks and are fully avoidable most of the time, but without battling, players will miss out on XP to gain levels. Leveling up also refills life, so it can be strategic to do so at critical moments.

Things only really get tough when there are several enemies on screen. The general strategy is to take each enemy on by finding enough room and luring them out, but that's impossible in arenas. Unfortunately, there's a lot of repetition in the bestiary, with enemies only changing color to signify more advanced versions – but the strategy and challenge largely remain the same. The maps, which are procedurally generated and can take anywhere from five minutes to half an hour to traverse, can also repeat too often. Swatting grass, rocks and logs yields materials to use on the surface, and enemies and chests can give you rare and legendary items randomly. Once topside, you set other heroes on tasks that you have to wait for them to complete, so then it's back to the void.

Characters can change jobs at Level 15 to gain more skills in the skill tree, and then again . . . after the game is done. Why? Because after the "last boss" there is a whole other level to tackle!

While the game is fun, beautiful, well-made and sports a genuinely great soundtrack, it can get tedious after a few hours due to its lack of variety in maps and enemies. With 30+ hours to complete the narrative, there should have been more to keep players engaged. If this kind of game is your bag though, and you've already played all the Harvest Moons, Rune Factories and Stories of Seasons you can find on store shelves and the Switch eShop, the price for diving into the Abyss of Silent Hope is justified by the high quality of its presentation.
– BRETT

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED GAMES
DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS
RATING: E10+

Wondering About Wandering

SHIREN THE WANDERER: THE TOWER OF FORTUNE AND THE DICE OF FATE

WITH SHIREN 6 on its way soon, I finally found the time to play Shiren 5. This game's been on my backlog for a couple of years, while its series has been on my radar for far longer – I've always wondered what it's like, but been too intimidated to actually try it.

Because its penalties are so harsh! If you fail at any point in one of Shiren the Wanderer's multi-tiered mystery dungeons, you get severely punished: You lose every item in your inventory, you drop every piece of gold you'd gathered up to that point *and* your hero, Shiren himself, gets his stats and experience points reset all the way back to Level 1. It is *brutal*. Absolutely unforgiving. If you're going to play and succeed in the Shiren series, you're going to do so perfectly – or not at all.

Knowing that was the reality of this franchise's play experience is what's made me only admire it from afar for so long. I loved the style of Shiren – as a character he just looks so cool in his battle-worn kasa hat and carrying a whole armory's worth of swords on his back at any one time – but I was only brave enough to actually invest time into playing the safer, simpler spin-off games of this series: the Pokémon Mystery Dungeon games. I'd still recommend those as a place to start for anyone out there who's never played any Mystery Dungeon titles at all, but I do have to admit that Shiren proper is a bit less terrifying to get into once you actually do get into it.

A thorough set of tutorials in this game's opening village walks newbies through every tiny piece of gameplay one step at a time, from basic combat to organizing Shiren's overflowing backpack full of items. Completing the tutorials also awards you with a set of starter items, setting you up to make your first real run into the actual dungeons.

In this installment, those dungeons take the form of the Tower of Fortune. There's more than one Tower, actually – a Tower of the Past, of the Present and of the Future – and at the top of each one lies one of the Dice of Fate. Any hero who's able to climb the towers and claim the dice will gain the power to rewrite the fate of anyone they choose! Shiren sets out to win the dice in an attempt to save the life of a terminally ill girl named Uyo – if he can change her fate, she won't be doomed to succumb to her disease after all!

Climbing the towers is done one floor at a time, and each floor's layout is generated randomly – you'll never see the same configuration of rooms and hallways twice, even if you fail in a run and restart the same tower from scratch. You've got to carefully explore each floor to find the staircase that'll allow you to ascend to the next floor, then rinse and repeat all the way up.

You may not want to quickly dash up the stairs the moment you find them, though! Success in a Shiren the Wanderer game is all about careful planning, and that includes taking full advantage of enemies lurking on lower floors – you should try to find and defeat them all to level Shiren up and better prepare him for the tougher challenges that await in each tower's highest reaches. Gathering helpful items is also critically important – in lots of RPGs you can safely ignore the inventory screen and make progress anyway, but the Shiren games demand you make full use of every magic wand and every shield and every scroll you find along the way.

And every onigiri! Because Shiren gets hungry! A hunger system forces you to play efficiently – you can't just wander forever, or else he'll suffer from starvation. Yikes!

Again, Shiren games can be intimidating, and there are a lot of systems to juggle here. Combined with the severe penalty of essentially erasing hours of your invested time if you ever happen to fail, this is a series that is absolutely not for everyone. But I did find that tension ultimately satisfying once I finally pushed through – and reached the top of the Tower! Perhaps I changed my own fate, and I won't be scared of playing this series any more!

– LUCAS

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RATING: E10+

A 30th Anniversary Encore

POCKY & ROCKY RESHRINED

IMAGINE MAKING GAMES with your best friends. Imagine being paid to do it. Then imagine being able to keep doing it for over three decades!

For the creators of Pocky & Rocky Reshrined, that's just their reality! This game is the latest release from Tengo Project, a trio of talented friends who have worked together at Natsume for over 30 years. Back at the beginning of their careers there, in the '90s, they teamed up to create several great run-'n'-gun action games and similar high-energy arcade hits. Now, through the last several years, they've been going back to those games they first made decades ago and totally remaking them, taking advantage of modern technology and development techniques to better realize their original creative visions – and then to expand upon them further!

Their first remake was Wild Guns Reloaded, which overhauled their old western shooter – it hit the Switch in 2018. After that, they remade their sidescrolling ninja action game The Ninja Warriors Again – it became The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors in 2019. Now Pocky & Rocky Reshrined is a wildly updated take on the SNES run-'n'-gun game Pocky & Rocky, from 1993. It may be their best yet!

This is a run-'n'-gun without any guns. Instead, you take command of cute, colorful cartoon characters living in a very Japan-inspired world, and you're opposed by creatures drawn straight out of Japanese folklore. Lots of them. Tons! The absolute volume of opponents here can be overwhelming to deal with, and it's easy to panic and let a swarm overrun you.

So . . . don't do that! Playing Pocky & Rocky Reshrined takes a measure of patience alongside three measures of skill. (The first will help you acquire the second.) If you take your time and just attack one group of enemies at a time, not rushing forward too quickly to trigger more foes' spawn points, then you can make your way through the gauntlets steadily and safely.

Pocky, Rocky and the other heroes may not be wielding guns, but their offensive output is just as fast as any weapon you'd see in a Contra game. The still screenshots of this game I first saw in Nintendo Power decades ago didn't convey how fast the action is here! Rocky chucks leaves as his projectiles, and his arm is moving quicker than a hummingbird's wings with how many he's able to throw out per second. It's super speedy!

Your basic attacks are your bread and butter, but you also have to master dodges to get out of the way of incoming enemies (especially the big bosses that try to just run you down), and each hero also has some kind of melee strike that can deflect enemy projectiles and return them to sender. I didn't understand the balance at first – so I took a lot of damage and hit the Game Over screen fairly soon after I began to play. Keeping defense at the forefront of your mind is critical! Once I began to get that, I had much more success. (But it is still a tough game.)

Bringing in a friend for two-player co-op action is advised. The game is named "Pocky *and* Rocky" after all! Getting two players running through and supporting each other is a blast in this one. It's highly recommended.

Now, I never played the original SNES version of this game, so I don't have a before/after comparison to offer this time. But it's my understanding that while Reshrined's first few stages are updated versions of SNES levels, the story here then deviates from that source material in order to bring in all-new places to run and gun. I had plenty of fun even without being able to tap into nostalgic memories from the '90s here, so any of you who actually did play Pocky & Rocky way back when should be over the moon when you fire this version up!

Shunichi Taniguchi, Toshiyasu Miyabe and Hiroyuki Iwatsuki, the three members of Tengo Project, have done it again. They may be the most enviable developers ever! **– LUCAS**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NATSUME
DEVELOPER: TENGO PROJECT
RATING: E10+

REVIEW CONTINUED FROM ISSUE #68

Wonders Never Cease

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

MAYBE I WASN'T so wrong after all?

Two issues ago, before Super Mario Bros. Wonder had been fully revealed, I made the prediction that the new Elephant Mario would be unable to jump. It made sense to me! Nintendo presenting a scenario in which the one most critical element of Mario's movement was removed seemed like just the kind of thing they'd do to mix things up in this new sequel.

One issue ago, I apologized for my prediction skills being so poor. After playing just the first few minutes of Super Mario Bros. Wonder, I discovered that not only could Elephant Mario jump, but he had just as much vertical ability as any other Mario form, despite his increased weight!

Now, in this issue, right here and now, I'm tempted to rescind my apology. Because I wasn't so wrong after all! Super Mario Bros. Wonder actually *does* contain some gameplay sequences in which players' ability to jump is removed! (It just happens when Mario or the other heroes touch certain Wonder Flowers, instead of the new Elephant Fruit power-up.)

The jumplessness comes into play when the heroes find themselves shapeshifted into Goomba form. A few different Wonder Flower scenes take that kind of approach – temporarily turning the tables and making the heroes walk a mile in their enemies' shoes – but the Goomba scenes were by far my favorite.

They're full of tension! You're just this teeny-legged little shambling shroom and the world is out to squash you. Goombas must be riddled with anxiety every day of their lives, even when Mario isn't actively trying to grind them into the ground!

After clearing the entire quest in Super Mario Bros. Wonder, several other Wonder Flower scenes stood out to me too. There's one where your hero transforms not into an enemy, but just a platform. You're a part of the scenery! And you're squashable once again, so you have to avoid being smooshed by rolling spiked balls. Then, in other Wonder scenes, you become the rolling spiked ball! You barrel down corridors and through the air at high speed, crashing all the way.

Sometimes the lights go out. Other times a high-speed chase sequence starts. Other times gravity disappears! I'm convinced that one of the Wonder scenes is an intentional homage to Balloon Fight, as your heroes are floating weightlessly through a night-time sky and have to dodge tiny spikes along the way.

Other retro references are much more direct, as some scenes will just straight-up play classic Mario tunes from games like Super Mario Bros. 3 and Super Mario Sunshine, and then give you a Wonder Seed with no effort required at all. That imbalance is a bit odd: Some Wonder Seeds can only be earned after extremely skillful play in clearing complicated obstacle courses, while others are just handed over to you for free. Literally! There are little homes you walk into and all you have to do to score a Seed is press A to advance a dialogue box.

So it sometimes feels like Super Mario Bros. Wonder can't quite decide how hard it wants to be. I suppose it's because Nintendo wants to accommodate as wide of a range of ages and skill levels as possible, so they make truly tough challenges for those who can handle them, but then also build in plenty of assistance and alternate levels with lower degrees of difficulty for youngsters and newcomers.

. . . And yet, if Nintendo really was trying to make this game totally approachable for kids, I think they really whiffed it in one critical area: the multiplayer. Super Mario Bros. Wonder looks leagues better, visually, than the old New Super Mario Bros. games. I think Wonder is a far superior solo experience than those titles were too. But New Super still holds the crown for "Best Mario Multiplayer for Families," because Wonder got rid of all the bubbles.

It used to be, when players of different skill levels were playing a New Super Mario game, the younger or less skilled gamers could choose to enter a bubble when a hard part of a level popped up. They'd lazily float around, fully protected from all danger for as long as they wanted to stay that way, while the players with higher skill could forge ahead and blaze the trail. It was a great system. It let me be the hero when I needed to be while my kids drifted along behind, and every player got to stay on-screen together.

It wasn't broke! But Nintendo decided to try to fix it.

The Mario Wonder solution for multiplayer is ghost forms. Now when a player of lesser skill falls behind, or falls in a pit, or gets chomped by a bad guy, they turn into shrill, shrieking ghosts and are given a countdown of five seconds to reach another, still-alive player. If they do, they get revived and get to keep going. If they don't make it in time, though, they fade out of the scene and lose a life.

It's constant panic and frustration for kids. The old way, with the bubbles, was relaxing. It was funny! They'd joke about how Daddy had to do all the work and they just got to be dragged along. Now, after just a few levels of ghosts being left behind or not being able to reach the restoring touch of another player in five seconds – *five!* – it's nothing but screams and tears.

What about the Yoshis, and Nabbit? The "easy mode" characters meant for kids to use? They help a bit, in that they don't take damage from enemies. So they eliminate one kind of failure. But getting scrolled off the screen for being too slow or falling in pits still triggers the ghost transformation, so they're not really any help in the end. Wonder's multiplayer is just not kid-friendly.

On the other hand, this same multiplayer system with ghostly bodies and five-second countdowns does work well for the online mode! If you're a solo player and you're challenging a tricky level, you can activate online status and play the level alongside strangers. They appear transparent as you play, and you can see all their movements as if they were on the couch next to you – and if you fail and turn ghostly, you can touch them to be restored and carry on. You and they can also place standees on the ground that serve as additional restoration points – those can be a godsend. I was taking on the game's super tough final *final* level and came to a tricky spot where I lost five times in a row – but some kind person had placed their standee at that same spot, so I could just flap my way over to it and keep getting brought back to life and keep trying again and again. That felt great!

So I'm back and forth on Super Mario Bros. Wonder. In some ways it blows old 2D Mario games away: It's the prettiest this series has ever been, it sounds great, it plays wonderfully as a single-player challenge or alongside skilled partners or online with helpful strangers. But it really drops the ball when its players are a couch full of young kids, which feels like an extra damaging blow since serving that same audience was the absolute strength of the New Super series. I'm torn. It's great for some. It's terrible for others.

I won't slam its review score down just because of our family's poor experience, though – you might very well have kids of the same age who would connect better with Wonder! And it is honestly phenomenal in every other aspect of its design beyond that one low point. So parents, be warned! But it's still pretty Wonderful. **– LUCAS**

9.0

When a Switch Version Suffers

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL 2

LIKE ITS PREDECESSOR from two years ago, Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2 is a Super Smash Bros. clone. And that's OK; the entire fighting game genre was built from trying to mimic Street Fighter II's success. Would we have platformers like Mega Man or Sonic had Mario not paved the way? And heck, before the term "first-person shooter" was coined, that genre was simply called "Doom clones" (even though Wolfenstein 3D came first). So, we're not going to fault NASB2 for taking cues from the pioneering leader in their field.

According to publisher GameMill Entertainment, this isn't just a simple update of what they released back in 2021; this game has been rebuilt from the ground up, and it shows in a lot of ways. For starters, there's been a significant shakeup in the character roster: Not everyone from the original has returned, and those who have made a comeback have basically been reinvented for this new title, with new movesets to go with the new look and feel. Further underscoring this is that, in an interesting twist, where the original game only had two of the four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in Leonardo and Michelangelo, the sequel *also* has only two of the four – only it's the *other* two, Raphael and Donatello. (April is also back, but Shredder's been relegated to boss status, sending Rocksteady to do his dirty work for him.)

More has gone into this game, too, at least at the outset. While the original game added voices eventually, this installment has them right out of the box. And a good thing, too, as it makes the character interactions across the new Campaign Mode all the more entertaining, with as many of the original voice actors for the characters as they could seemingly get reprising their roles.

The Campaign Mode itself reminds me of Adventure Mode in Melee, but more evolved, with non-fighting interactions with other characters, power-ups and a twist of roguelite elements, though sadly no full-length platforming stages. It has a hub world, and an actual story, too, centered around Vlad Plasmius and Clockwork from Danny Phantom. (Never seen it, but I didn't need to be familiar with the show to get them; they could have been OCs, for all I knew, so newcomers to that particular Nick franchise should hopefully not need to worry about being unfamiliar with the source material.)

But while NASB2 does a lot of things right, with fun and innovative Smash-style gameplay, it's what it does wrong that tanks the package. Specifically, it does not seem to have been optimized for the Nintendo Switch at all. You'd think that with the roll that the most family-friendly console on the market has been on, they'd want to make sure an extremely family-friendly title was at its best on that console, but here we are.

The problems are twofold: bugs, and loading/performance. While for the most part it seems to run well enough during matches, it's pretty much everything else around the matches that brings it down. Just starting the game takes nearly a full minute before you get to the parade of logos that precedes so many games nowadays, and loading for playing matches – you know, the main thing you do in the game – can take about as long. (One time, I checked in on another game while waiting to play this one.) In fact, the match loading screen song they play frequently ends up restarting. Extra fun if you get a Game Over and continue, when the last stage's music and the loading theme overlap! It really disrupts the flow of the game.

So, would I recommend All-Star Brawl 2? Yes! Would I recommend it for Switch? No! At least, not yet. If they manage to work the kinks out of this thing so that it's less buggy and you spend more time playing and less time waiting, then it might be an easier recommendation. But in the meantime, unless you have just that much free time or a ton of patience, stay away – or at least see if you can try before you buy. **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAME MILL
DEVELOPER: FAIR PLAY LABS
RATING: E10+

5.5

A Remake with Mistakes

STAR OCEAN: THE SECOND STORY R

WHEN IT WAS first announced in the June 2023 Direct, Star Ocean: The Second Story R instantly became one of my most anticipated games – the gorgeous 2.5D visuals with 2D characters and 3D environments, the interesting concept of choosing between two protagonists and my positive experience with 2022's Star Ocean: The Divine Force all had me excited for this remake and what it had in store. However, while the game looks, performs and sounds excellent on Switch, this remake's improvements can only do so much. The Second Story R's dated narrative design and brutal difficulty spikes drag it down often, and it made me want to finish the game – which can be a pretty beefy RPG – sooner rather than later.

I want to start with the good, though, because this remake nails its presentation almost perfectly. The 2.5D art style is a joy to play through, whether you're running through the massive world map or exploring the many towns and dungeons.

Taking the 2D characters through 3D environments makes this world feel massive. It's like you have this vast, beautiful space to explore at your fingertips! Adding to that are the new character portraits and flashy spell animations in combat. The rearranged soundtrack complements the adventure as well.

This remake's new quality-of-life improvements also enhance the experience with the addition of fast travel and the Assault Action system, where you can call upon four allies in battle to assist your active team.

It's too bad that this game's new features can't cover up flaws that are a product of its time! (It was initially released in 1999 on PlayStation.)

The narrative pacing often felt disjointed. Much of the early game is slow. You're traveling from town to town, recruiting characters and performing menial tasks. Once you reach a certain point, the game turns on its head, and you're introduced to the main antagonists: the Ten Wise Men. It's a really cool and dramatic moment in the story . . . and then? You're sent from town to town, recruiting characters and performing menial tasks.

This highlights the main issue I had with the story: It never digs deep enough or takes time to let a juicy reveal or character backstory breathe. There were so many instances when a character would say something interesting or a plot hook would materialize, and then the cast would say something to the effect of "OK, let's go," and that was that.

I found it tough to get invested in the cast due to this, and the dual-protagonist system doesn't help. With this system, you choose between Rena or Claude, and you see the story through their perspective, with scenes unique to each protagonist.

I chose to play as Rena, and while I loved her, I didn't like Claude. I feel like this system is supposed to push players to do two playthroughs, so you can see the full story. But I think it fails, because it held so much back that I didn't even want to consider a second playthrough as Claude.

The action combat system is also a mixed bag. It involves four characters you can control, and they have a host of abilities, spells and formations to play around with. Testing out new combinations and strategies provided a lot of fun, and there's great flexibility in how you can build up your party members' strengths.

The game's difficulty spikes were demoralizing, though, especially at the end. Unless you commit to a hefty grind and/or a ton of RNG crafting, you will most likely have a tough time, even if you've handled everything before it with ease.

Despite my issues with The Second Story R, I'm glad Square put in the work to remake this game. I think it shows exactly where remakes can excel – and where they could use more work, if other RPGs eventually get this treatment. **– MAGGIE**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPERS: SQUARE ENIX, TRI-ACE & GEMDROPS RATING: T

Four's a Crowd

SONIC SUPERSTARS

FOUR-PLAYER SONIC is unplayable – and that may be why playing it is so much fun!

Listen, I think we all knew how this was going to turn out. A 2D Sonic the Hedgehog game, trying to keep track of *four players* simultaneously? There was just never any way that was actually going to work.

In this series it's hard enough for solo players to follow the movements of Sonic alone, as he zips, spins, twirls and gets flung in all directions. Most segments of each stage only appear on the screen for a second or two, max, as he speeds past the scenery and never stops to smell the roses. So how exactly were the developers at Sonic Team and Arzest thinking that would work with *four* at once?

So, it doesn't. But that's OK! Since the way it doesn't work is hilarious.

When you begin to play any Act in any Zone in Sonic Superstars with four active players, all four will appear on the screen together at the start of the stage . . . and that will be the last time they're all together until the end of that stage. Because the action is so fast and because there are so many different paths to take when exploring 2D Sonic stages, it's impossible to keep the whole team on-screen all the time – someone is always lagging behind and getting scrolled out of view while the leaders of the pack charge forward. There's no splitscreen view to keep attention trained on every hero at once – whoever is out in front gets the camera's focus, and the rest are left behind.

The result is that the "lead" player is constantly switching, in a way that almost becomes a competitive sub-game in and of itself. Can you stay in the front longer than your friends? Or will you get scrolled off-screen and be forced to concede the lead spot to someone else?

Super Mario Bros. Wonder has kind of a similar system, in which the lead player gets a crown displayed over their character's head – until they fall in a pit or someone else grabs a level-ending flagpole higher than them, at which point the crown shifts its allegiance to them. But, appropriately for Sonic, the switches come along much more quickly in Superstars. Constantly!

And yet it doesn't get frustrating. Superstars is superior to Wonder in this way! I just complained a few pages ago about how players who get left behind in Super Mario Bros. Wonder get turned into ghosts, and then they have to frantically try to get brought back to life in less than five seconds. (Which my younger kids couldn't do. It was terrible.) Here in Superstars, though, anyone who's scrolled out of view can simply freely respawn, almost instantly, by pressing A. That's it. They return to action and match the current position of the team leader, and then they're off to the races again. It's joyful. It's funny. My kids loved it!

8.5

There's just no frustration in the equation, as there's no penalty for getting left behind and no cost to respawn as many times as you need to. So levels maintain their signature Sonic speed, and the active heroes are leapfrogging past one another all the while. And it works! Keeping all four on the screen together doesn't work. That was never going to. But this way of keeping everyone active does work.

So multiplayer Sonic Superstars gets a thumbs-up from me, but I also fired up a separate save file apart from the one shared with my sons in order to experience the game as a solo player as well. It's nearly a totally different experience that way, but just as delightful!

Sonic Mania I thought was masterful in how it recaptured the magic of this series' earliest era; Superstars is nearly as fun as that one was. The Zones are creative and filled with fun gimmicks and objects to interact with that are either brand-new or were only used rarely in past games, so they feel brand-new. There's a balanced blend of fast-running sections where your character is just zipped along for the ride and slower-paced areas that demand more precision with your jumps. Portals to the minigame that let you claim possession of a Chaos Emerald feel plentiful, and once you earn an Emerald, it unlocks a new superpower like being able to summon a swarm of clones across the screen to deal lots of damage to foes, or shape-shift into a fast-swimming water form to more quickly cruise through the series' infamous "you're air's running out!" underwater areas.

Though you can ignore all the extra Emerald powers too, and still make fine progress without them.

The soundtrack is another high point, extending the track record of Sonic games being packed with killer tunes. Tee Lopes, the composer of Mania, was back in action for this one, and his work just keeps getting better. Nearly every stage theme is a banger!

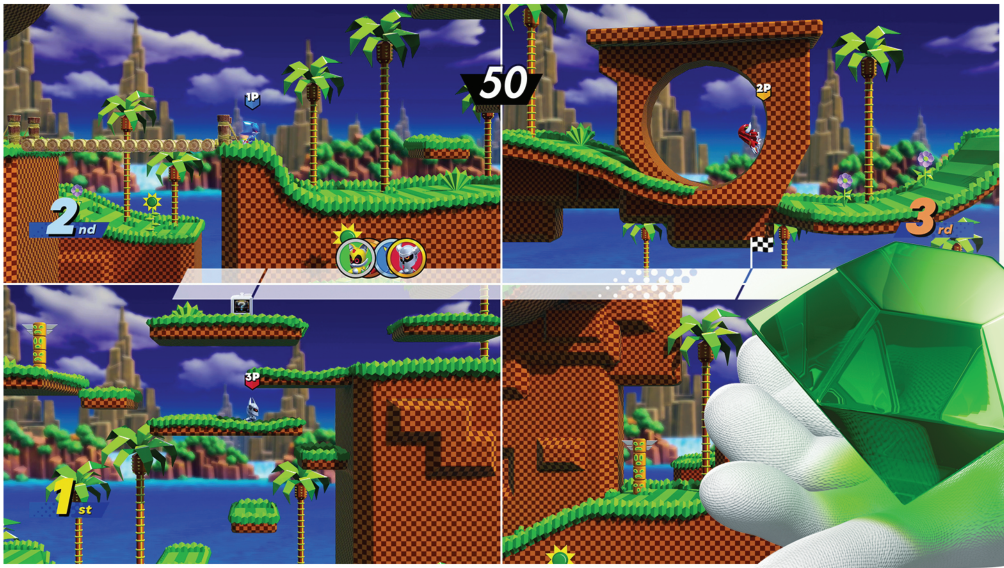
Now, that's a lot of praise for an old Nintendo diehard like myself to offer to a Sonic game, so let me point out one big negative: The Battle Mode is underbaked. Comically so! It feels like an unfinished proof of concept when played online against others, and the game as a whole would've been better if it had just been cut entirely and the whole of Superstars had been a local-only affair.

And, oddly, Battle Mode does offer splitscreen for four players! The thing that Story Mode doesn't do! (Probably because the Story Mode levels are a lot more visually intense and contain sequences that demand a single focus for the camera, but still. It's funny to have it here in any capacity.)

Sonic Superstars is two games in one: a solid Sonic solo sequel and a ridiculous, hilarious multiplayer mess. Play and enjoy it both ways! (And consider it as an alternative to Super Mario Bros. Wonder for four-player family time, for sure.)

– LUCAS

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SONIC TEAM & ARZEST RATING: E



Smooth Movin'

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

THIS SHOULD'VE BEEN a launch title.

That's not me criticizing the game for being unpolished or of poor quality; it's because it's the type of game that would've been a perfect way to showcase the myriad methods of manipulating Joy-Cons and all their features back when the Switch was first introduced. It's also a ton of fun for both solo players *and* groups!

As we mentioned in previews, Move It! is a direct follow-up to WarioWare: Smooth Moves from the Wii, and shares a lot of the same design choices and story beats: the Joy-Cons being represented in-game as "Form Stones" from a primitive society, each character having one or two Forms as their "theme" for their level and Forms being introduced by The Voice from Above like an unwittingly hilarious ASMR video. Wario and his friends have brought all the trademark WarioWare wackiness with them on vacation to Caresaway Island: nose picking, unorthodox cooking methods, 9-Volt's Nintendo nostalgia level, toilet (and toilet paper) humor, and egg laying. Also, both drawing AND stamping with your butt!

While I couldn't play the sole four-player game that was available, I played the Story Mode in both solo and co-op modes, as well as the co-op minigames. The solo Story Mode has a creative continue method if you lose all of your chances: strike a pose with the Joy-Cons in the right positions, and you're revived with a full life bar.

The co-op Story Mode requires each person to have a pair of Joy-Cons, and for good reason: the two players share a life pool, and if you fail a level, your partner can tag in, beat the microgame and save you from embarrassment! There are also several co-op microgames that have two different Forms, one for each player (one example features one player pitching balls and the other hitting), and while I liked these variations, I would've liked to be able to split a pair of Joy-Cons between two players.

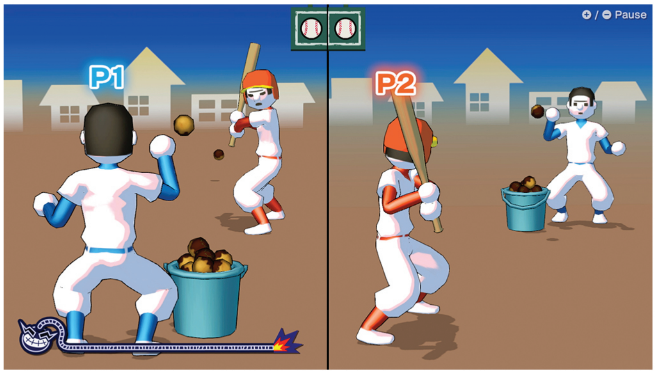
Out of the other multiplayer modes, I enjoyed playing Copycat Mirror the most: It involves the player with the Joy-Cons facing away from the TV, while the other player faces the TV and makes the motions that the other player needs to mirror. It's a little confusing at first, but my husband and I managed to get it right after a little work and a lot of laughter. "Listen to the Doctor!" is also making its return, although some of its pre-game prompts were a little difficult to follow so quickly.

A couple aspects of the overall design I appreciated were the Joy-Cons lightly vibrating when my turn came up in co-op, as well as the narration of on-screen prompts in most of the game modes (except for Copycat Mirror, but that was because of its design), so even the youngest gamers can follow along with the action.

The Forms are once again all creatively named, including such gems as Lovestruck and Fashionista, along with the utilitarian Knight, Tug of War and Massage. One of the more imaginative forms is Hand Model, which requires you to hold the right Joy-Con with the IR sensor pointed toward your dominant hand to play games like Rock/Paper/Scissors or catch the ring on Alear's finger. In some Hand Model games, you can even see the outline of your hand on-screen, which is pretty nifty and cements my belief that this would've made a better launch title than 1-2-Switch. (Who cares about counting unseen marbles, anyway?)

As much as I liked the Story Mode, it felt to me like the cast has gotten a bit stale over the years, and I'd been hoping to see some new playable characters make their debut; I was a little disappointed that wasn't the case (although Rhythm Heaven fans will be very pleased). We haven't had a new character join the main cast since WarioWare Gold, and it's time we see some new faces get promoted from supporting characters to the main cast!

If you love wacky multiplayer Switch games, WarioWare: Move It! deserves to have a spot on your shelf. It'll have everyone shaking their sillies out! **— REBECCA**



SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYS.
RATING: E10+

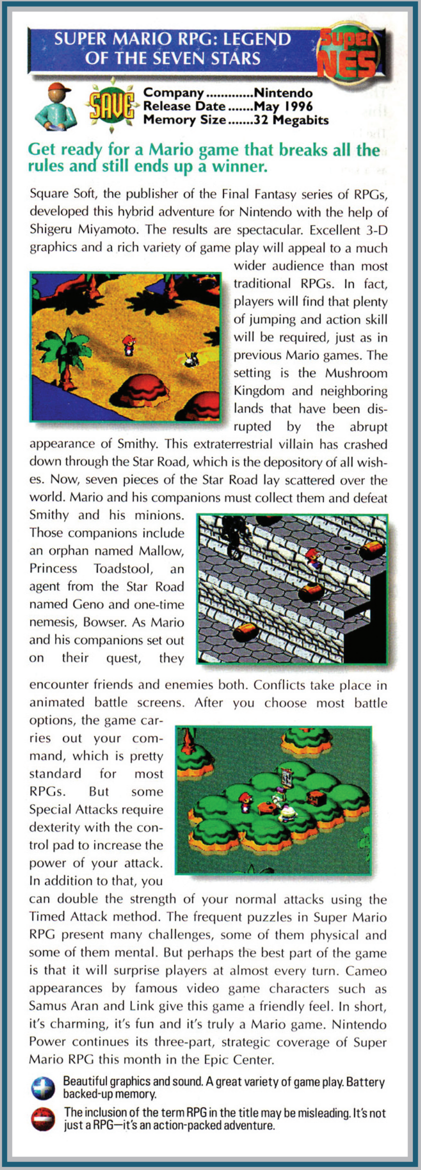
8.0

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits	6.5	Rebecca	#63
Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp	9.5	Lucas	#65
AEW: Fight Forever	7.0	David	#67
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration	9.5	Kris	#64
Atelier Ryza 3: Alchemist of the End & The Secret Key	9.0	Thor	#67
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Baten Kaitos I & II HD Remaster	8.0	Lucas	#68
Bayonetta 3	9.0	Jonathan	#63
Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon	8.0	Jonathan	#65
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
ConnecTank	7.5	Lucas	#67
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Detective Pikachu Returns	6.0	Lucas	#68
Digimon Survive	8.0	Maggie	#63
Disney Illusion Island	6.5	J.-Charles	#68
DNF Duel	8.0	Sean	#66
Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons	8.0	Kris	#67
Dragon Quest Treasures	8.0	Matthew T.	#64
Everybody 1-2-Switch!	7.5	Kris	#67
Fire Emblem Engage	8.5	Rebecca	#64
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
Harvestella	8.0	Nadia	#63
Infinity Strash: Dragon Quest - The Adventure of Dai	5.0	Lucas	#68
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe	9.0	Lucas	#65
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Loop8: Summer of Gods	6.0	Maggie	#66
Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope	9.0	Lucas	#63
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Master Detective Archives: Rain Code	7.0	Matthew T.	#67
Mega Man Battle Network Legacy Collection	8.0	David	#65
Metroid Prime Remastered	10	Lucas	#64
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
Nintendo Switch Sports	7.5	Lucas	#68
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3: Slime Speedway	8.0	David	#63
Octopath Traveler II	8.5	Rebecca	#65
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Pikmin 4	10	Lucas	#67
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Scarlet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Pokémon Violet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Puzzle Bobble Everybubble!	8.0	Jonathan	#67
Rain on Your Parade	8.0	Lucas	#65
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 3 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#68
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Sea of Stars	9.5	Kris	#68
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Sonic Frontiers	7.0	Tony	#64
Sonic Origins Plus	8.0	Tony	#67
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life	7.0	Rebecca	#67
Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival	8.0	J.-Charles	#63
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails into Reverie	10	Maggie	#67
The Legend of Heroes: Trails to Azure	10	Maggie	#65
The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails	8.0	Maggie	#68
The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom	10	Lucas	#66
Theatrhythm Final Bar Line	9.0	J.-Charles	#65
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
We Love Katamari REROLL + Royal Reverie	9.5	Jonathan	#66
Wunderling DX	8.0	Lucas	#64
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62


SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

Company ....Nintendo
Release Date ....May 1996
Memory Size ....32 Megabits

Get ready for a Mario game that breaks all the rules and still ends up a winner.

Square Soft, the publisher of the Final Fantasy series of RPGs, developed this hybrid adventure for Nintendo with the help of Shigeru Miyamoto. The results are spectacular. Excellent 3-D graphics and a rich variety of game play will appeal to a much wider audience than most traditional RPGs. In fact, players will find that plenty of jumping and action skill will be required, just as in previous Mario games. The setting is the Mushroom Kingdom and neighboring lands that have been disrupted by the abrupt appearance of Smithy. This extraterrestrial villain has crashed down through the Star Road, which is the depository of all wishes. Now, seven pieces of the Star Road lay scattered over the world. Mario and his companions must collect them and defeat Smithy and his minions. Those companions include an orphan named Mallow, Princess Toadstool, an agent from the Star Road named Geno and one-time nemesis, Bowser. As Mario and his companions set out on their quest, they encounter friends and enemies both. Conflicts take place in animated battle screens. After you choose most battle options, the game carries out your command, which is pretty standard for most RPGs. But some Special Attacks require dexterity with the control pad to increase the power of your attack. In addition to that, you can double the strength of your normal attacks using the Timed Attack method. The frequent puzzles in Super Mario RPG present many challenges, some of them physical and some of them mental. But perhaps the best part of the game is that it will surprise players at almost every turn. Cameo appearances by famous video game characters such as Samus Aran and Link give this game a friendly feel. In short, it's charming, it's fun and it's truly a Mario game. Nintendo Power continues its three-part, strategic coverage of Super Mario RPG this month in the Epic Center.

+ Beautiful graphics and sound. A great variety of game play. Battery backed-up memory.

− The inclusion of the term RPG in the title may be misleading. It's not just a RPG—it's an action-packed adventure.

THE NP OPINION
SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

WE'VE JUST RENDERED our judgment on the new remake of Super Mario RPG, but what did Nintendo Power think about the original? . . . Well, it's hard to say exactly. Back in 1996, NP was using a weird split-rating system that gave each game four different review scores, and beyond that, six different editors could either choose to give each game their approval or not. For Super Mario RPG, five out of the six did so – the only holdout was Dan Owsen, the NP writer most famously heard as the voice at the beginning of Super Metroid. ("The last Metroid is in captivity.") There was one game in the same issue, NP #84, that earned a thumbs-up from all six editors: Ken Griffey Jr.'s Winning Run. So we can surely expect to see a remake of that one next? (For more detail on NP's SMRPG opinion, we've reprinted the full text of their review above. Give it a read!) **– LUCAS**

FILM RESTORATION

The Live-Action Mario Movie, Now in 4K!

Diehard fans of 1993's Super Mario Bros.: The Movie have revived and remastered the cult classic.

PLUMBER ALERT!

It's been over 30 years since Super Mario Bros. first hit theaters – no, not that one, with the guy from Guardians of the Galaxy. The *other* one, with the guy from Who Framed Roger Rabbit! Yeah, you know, the live-action one, that we first spotlighted aaaaaaall the way back in our third issue.

For those unfamiliar: In 1993, Bob Hoskins and John Leguizamo starred opposite Dennis Hopper in a live-action sci-fi adaptation of Super Mario Bros. In it, the two plumbers from Brooklyn wind up on a chase through another dimension: a dimension where dinosaurs evolved to become the dominant humanoid life form. Their goal is to rescue Princess Daisy and stop the evil King Koopa from using her to reunite the dino world and the human world with a special meteorite fragment.

It was also received so poorly at the time that it effectively rewrote the Mario canon, with Nintendo trying to disavow nearly everything they could that was tied to the movie – including Mario and Luigi being plumbers from Brooklyn!

But as I was saying, it's been over 30 years since that release, and that means it's time to celebrate – in *style!* That's why the fine folks from the Super Mario Bros. The Movie Archive – Ryan Hoss, Steven Applebaum, Ryan Parente and Ben Gourlay – have teamed up with Max Aboudara from Australia's Umbrella Entertainment to bring us what can only be called the *definitive* edition of this cult classic.

Of course, it isn't *just* because we've just passed the 30th anniversary that the time seemed right for such a momentous release. As the Archive folks

explained to us, "It's a confluence of a number of factors happily aligning." Factors such as Umbrella Entertainment recently deciding that they would offer more boutique-style Blu-ray products to the physical market. And having worked with the SMBTMA before, they knew that they could produce an even more elaborate edition of the film.

According to the Archive crew, work began on the project in early 2023, as international rights holder Pathé restored the movie in evo-licious 4K. Umbrella was then able to re-license the movie and make it available to the market with the world's first UltraHD Blu-ray edition. As this went on, more new materials became available, including 4K scans of the original theatrical trailers. Recent advancements in digital restoration also allowed them to enhance deleted scenes and provide a better restoration of the workprint edition of the film. (Workprints are rough versions used by editors during the filmmaking process.)

Of course, the growing popularity of the film among a new generation of fans – many of whom never even knew a Mario movie existed before 2023 – likely helped, too. In fact, new people have been discovering it for years, and loving it, warts and all, which has helped elevate it from frequent "worst video game movie" list occupant to the cult classic it is today. (And if you're just discovering the existence of this film, you might also be pleased to know that there were no fewer than *three* different Mario cartoons in the years leading up to its release! Check YouTube or your favorite streaming service today!)

Oh, and our friends at the Archive note that the smash success of Universal/Illumination's CG-animated film, the recent release of Super Mario Bros. Wonder and the opening of the heavily Mario-themed Super Nintendo World in California over the last year have only helped to fuel Mario mania even further, making the timing of this release all the more perfect!

So, what does this latest release bring to the table? Quite a bit! The UltraHD Blu-ray and Blu-ray editions have a brand-new 4K scan of the film, which was taken from the original camera negatives. There's a new 5.1 DTS-HD Master Audio mix, as well as 2.0 English audio and English subtitles. Four audio commentaries are packed in, including one from screenwriter Parker Bennett; another with co-producer Fred Caruso and production designer David L. Snyder; a third with key makeup artist Jeff Goodwin, special effects crew member Mark McCoy and production assistant Craig Edwards; and the final one from Steven Applebaum and Ryan Hoss.

That's not all, though! There's over an hour of new featurettes, including interviews with cast and crew that were recorded over the course of a few months in 2023. Deleted scenes have been restored all the way up to 4K, and original bonus features from previous releases are here as well. That includes the "This Ain't No Game" featurette; the "Making Of" featurette; the original electronic press kit with cast interviews and behind-the-scenes footage; and galleries featuring stills, storyboards and concept art.

And that's not even getting into all of the physical bonus goodies packed in with some of the higher-end editions! (See the sidebar!)

Naturally, though, some potential customers will be concerned with whether or not they can even play these discs if they purchase a copy. (After all, some folks with the IQ of a pre-evolved Iggy and Spike decided some time ago that region-locking content was the way to go, necessitating caution with international purchases.)

But fear not! The folks down under at Umbrella are approaching this with a post-evolved Iggy and Spike mindset! "Officially," say the Archive crew, "the Blu-ray is marketed as Region B (UltraHD Blu-ray discs are not region-coded), but 99% of Umbrella releases are actually region-free, and the company has assured us this is one of them!"

That means that the Blu-ray disc will play in any Blu-ray player, including PlayStation 3 and up. For the UltraHD Blu-ray, however, you'll need a stand-alone 4K UltraHD Blu-ray player, or a PlayStation 5, Xbox One X, Xbox One S or Xbox Series X console.

This version of the movie is available for pre-order now, with an estimated release date of January 17, 2024. So walk tall, be proud and place your order for a copy today! And when it arrives, call up your local Python Pizza to get the Koopa Special (that's pterodactyl tail, dino, lizard, hold the mammal, no worms, and spicy), and settle in for a night of classic landmark '90s cinema! **— DAVID**

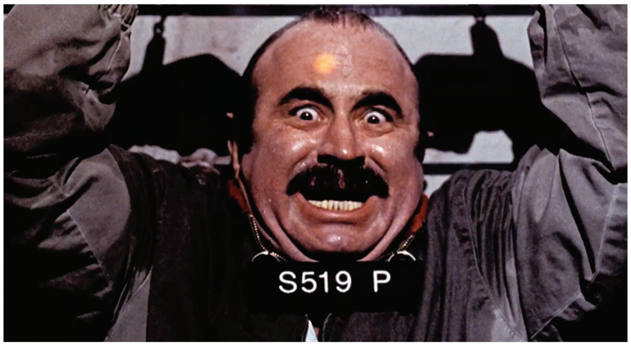
OPTIONS FOR OWNERSHIP

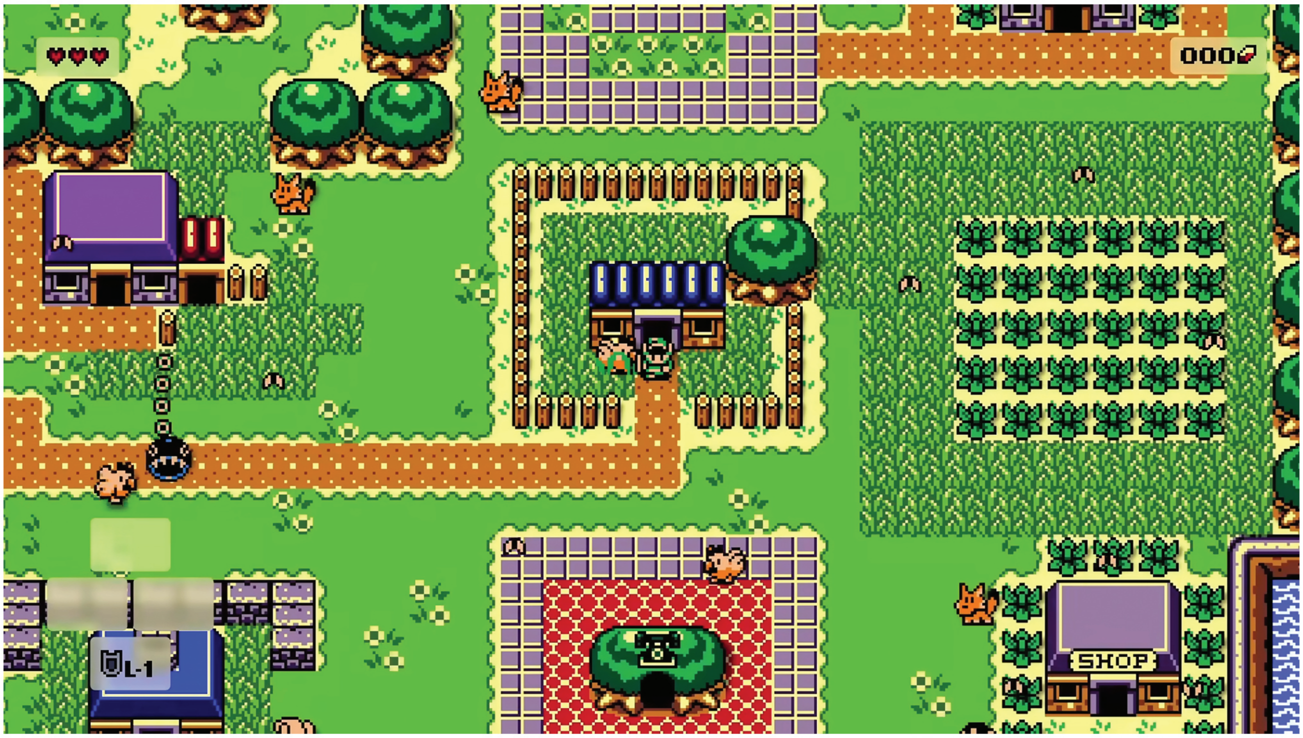
VARIOUS VERSIONS AVAILABLE!

The Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary restoration comes in four varieties. In addition to the standard two-disc Blu-ray ($34) and 4K UHD + Blu-ray ($41) sets, there are two different Collector's Editions. For $75, serious film aficionados can score a 250+ page hardcover book with production materials, interviews and artwork, a rigid outer slipcase with classic artwork, another classic art-designed slipcase, eight replica lobby cards and an A3 reversible poster. For those who *really* want to go all-out, there's the "TRUST THE FUNGUS" Collector's Edition for $100, which features all of the above, as well as a 200-page bound book of scripts (including early drafts), a genuine film cell in a collectible case, a replica of the original 1993 souvenir magazine (for those of us who don't have our originals), a *second* A3 reversible poster (featuring the original posters from the USA, Australia, Thailand and Japan) and the créme de la créme of all the collectibles: a sticker sheet!

However, there's only one way to get any of these at present, and that's by going through the Umbrella Home Entertainment website and importing these products to whichever corner of this miraculous mammal-evolved world you happen to live in.

shop.umbrellaent.com.au





FAN-MADE REMAKE

WIDENING LINK'S AWAKENING

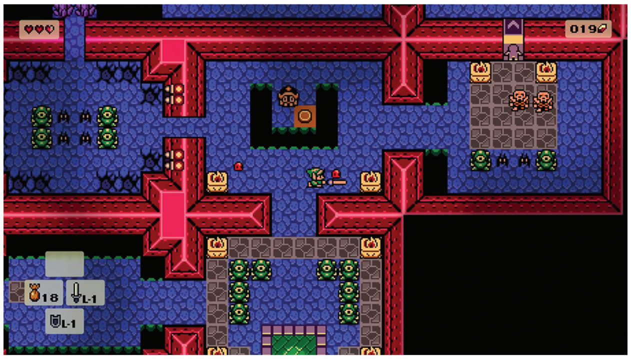
All of Koholint Island comes alive, all at once, in this impressive PC port!

THAT'S NOT A bunch of stitched-together screenshots – it's actual, active gameplay of a brand-new, fan-made PC remake called The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening DX HD. An anonymous hobbyist developer has rebuilt the entire Game Boy Color classic, while giving it one stunning new feature: an insanely widened point of view! Screen restrictions are a thing of the past. Now you can see for miles!

Seriously: DX HD gives players total control over the level of camera zoom, and if you want to you can pull the perspective so high up into the sky that you can see the entirety of Koholint Island all at the same time. Even more impressive? Every enemy and NPC is active and alive! They're all running through their programmed patterns, even if Link is all the way on the opposite end of the island.

The expanded view extends into the dungeons as well, letting you peak into adjacent rooms before you enter them. It's a totally different way to play a top-down Zelda game!

. . . If you get to play it, that is. Nintendo's legal ninjas swooped in and killed the original download link for this one just after it went viral in December – so you'll have to do a little extra digging if you want to unearth it. (But it's worth it!) **– LUCAS**



BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

THANK YOU MARIO!
BUT OUR PRINCESS IS
IN ANOTHER ISSUE!

You've reached the end of another NF, dear reader, but your quest is not yet complete! You must carry on with reading our next issue, NF #70, which will shine its spotlight on the luminous Princess Peach! Sure, she's been a supporting party member in the new **Super Mario RPG** just recently, and fully playable in **Super Mario Bros. Wonder** just before that. But we'll be turning the clock all the way back to her point of origin in the '80s and tracing her entire career as she prepares to take the leading role in the all-new **Princess Peach: Showtime!** in March! We'll also have our full reviews ready to roll for **Another Code: Recollection, Mario vs. Donkey Kong** and more . . . and we *may* even get to cover Nintendo's latest home hardware reveal? Possibly? The Big N does sometimes big announcements in January . . . so stay tuned!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #70:

PRINCESS PEACH: **SHOWTIME!**

THIRSTY SUITORS

ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG

CONTRA: OPERATION GALUGA

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET: THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF AREA ZERO, PART 2: **THE INDIGO DISK**

PRISON CITY

SUPER BOMBERMAN R 2

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

TACTICS OGRE: REBORN

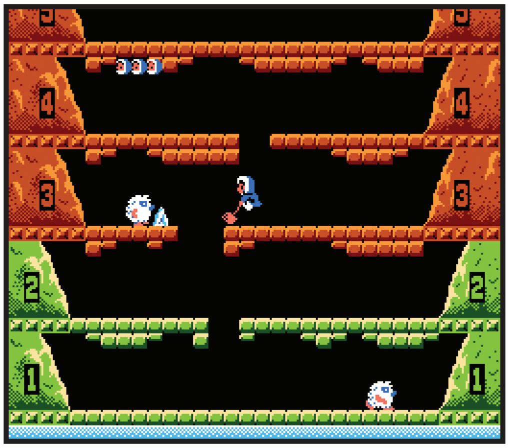
BLUEY: THE VIDEOGAME

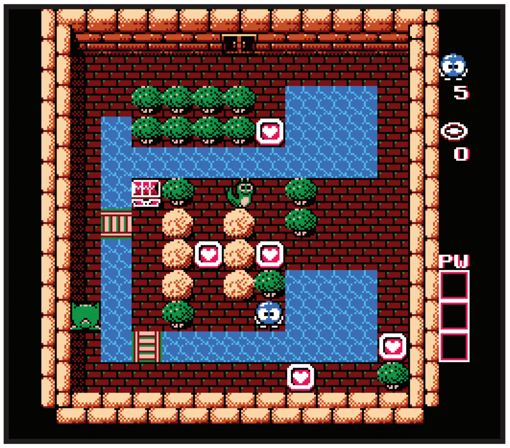
THE MAKING OF **THE IMPACT OF IWATA**

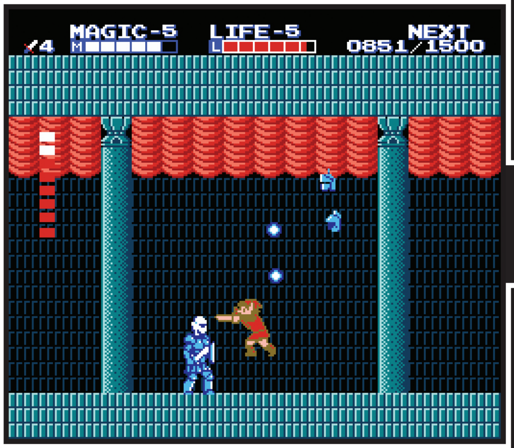
AND MUCH **MORE!**

MARCH/APRIL 2024

MY TOP 3 REMAKE REQUESTS







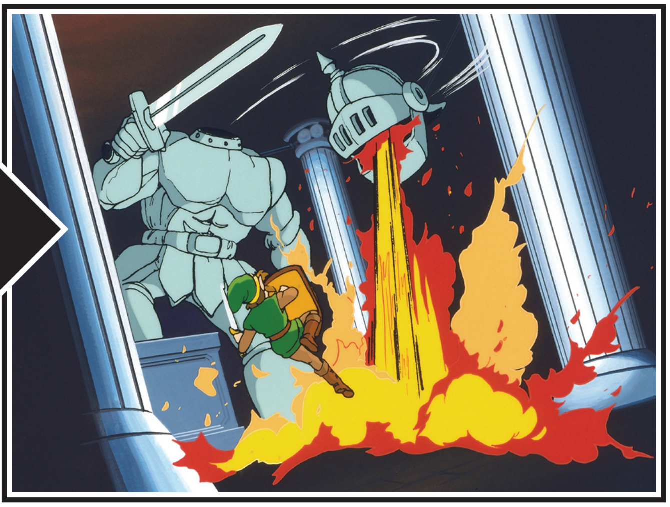
MY WISHLIST IS growing! How could it not, after the mind-blowing reveals of remakes for games like Super Mario RPG and Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door – remakes that seemed so impossible to hope for, and yet are materializing on the Switch all the same? If games like that can get the remake treatment after all these years, then I have to imagine that any other back-catalog Nintendo title is fair game.

So why not go public with my top hopes and dreams? Here are some personal requests from me, Nintendo. (If you're listening.)

First up, I know I mention wanting an Ice Climber sequel a lot as a running joke, but I do think there's a greater game to be built on the foundation laid by the 1985 original. It was made too early to have a real measure of Nintendo polish – if they'd simply revisit its gameplay idea of bashing your way up a series of mountains, I know they could correct for the old game's shortcomings. So I don't care if it's Ice Climber 2! Just a remake of Ice Climber 1 would make my heart sing.

The Adventures of Lolo series has been inactive for nearly a quarter-century now, but it's a perfect candidate for a visual remaster. All the gameplay and puzzle designs can stay untouched! Just give it a fresh coat of paint and release it on modern platforms! (How has HAL not done this already? This used to be a huge franchise for them!)

Finally, I'll add my voice to the chorus of thousands who've been asking for a redo of Zelda II for decades now. The Adventure of Link is another of those old NES titles that has so much untapped potential lurking underneath its surface! It was held back by the limitations of the NES hardware and the, at that point, lack of game design and balancing experience among its developers. Zelda II's structure, story and most of all its innovative 2D combat system are all perfect templates that a modern, tested, talented team could really make magic from. What if the proven 2D Metroid makers over at MercurySteam were to take their experience from creating Samus Returns and Dread and craft "New Adventure of Link"? Or how about the Ubisoft team that's just finishing work on the great-looking new 2D Prince of Persia? I really just want a bold 2D Zelda that lives up to the promise of Zelda II's incredible old concept art. Make it happen, Nintendo! **– LUCAS**



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